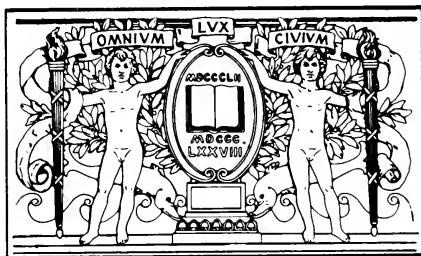




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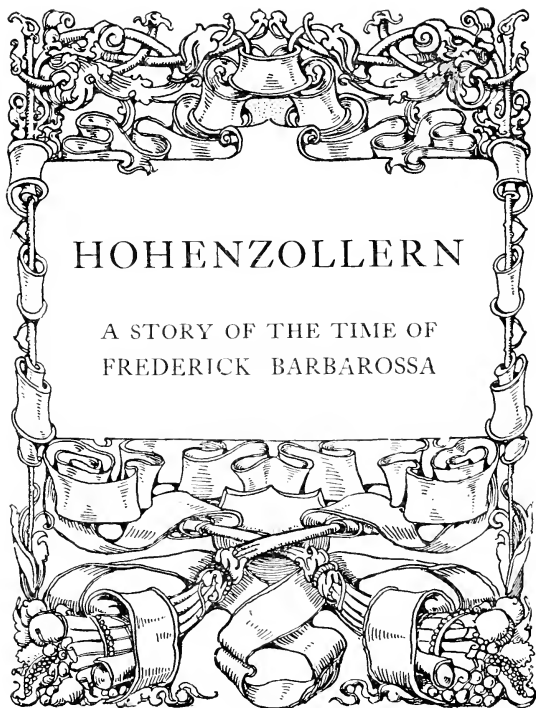
A Story of the time of Hardarossa

Gyrus Coward and Robin



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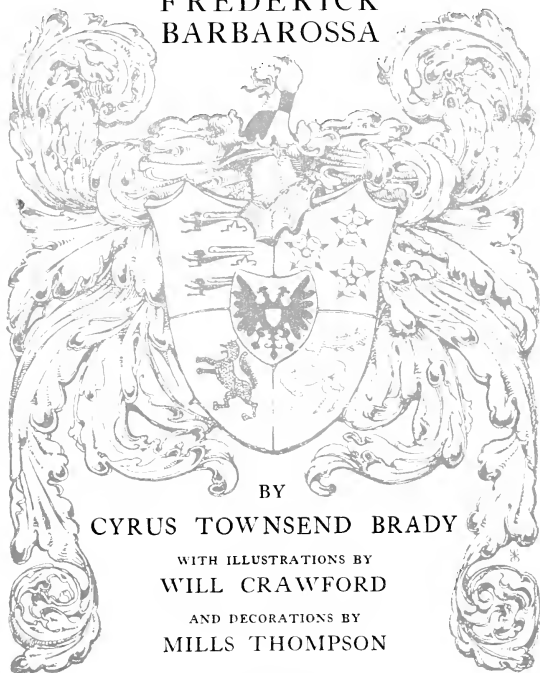
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“ ‘I ’ll fight ye both for it,’ he cried.”

HOHENZOLLERN

A STORY OF THE TIME OF
FREDERICK
BARBAROSSA



BY
CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
WILL CRAWFORD

AND DECORATIONS BY
MILLS THOMPSON



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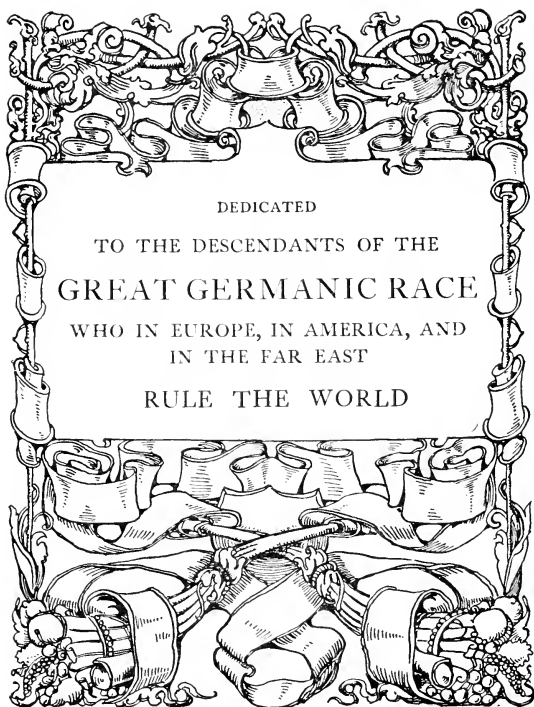
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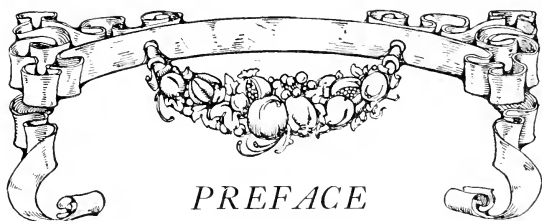
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PREFACE

I FIRST laid the scene of this dramatic sketch in Altruria, or Zenda, or some other undiscovered country, that had no existence save in my mind's eye ; and the characters were purely imaginary also. Then, as I thought it over, I concluded to put the book back in the days of Barbarossa. For one thing, nobody knows much about the days of Barbarossa, therefore liberties can be taken with impunity ; and for another thing, what little I did know of Barbarossa had awakened my admiration for him. I liked him, and, liking him, I wanted to put him in a book ! When I began to look him up further, in order that the liberties I took might not be too great, I found -- and it is a singular literary coincidence indeed -- that the prototypes of the four principal char-

PREFACE

acters in the story, the emperor, the duke, the count, and the countess, really did exist, and that they bore some such relationship to one another as might readily have developed the situations I had imagined.

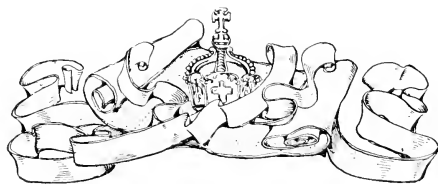
It had been years since I had read anything about Barbarossa or his time. I had no recollection whatever of his political rivalry and subsequent friendship with Henry the Lion, or the fact that Conrad von Hohenzollern, the founder of his house, married the Countess von Vohburg, who was an orphan and a great heiress in her own right. It was a case of imagination and reality fitting together. To add to my interest, I found that these people of the past had a connection with the present, in that their descendants rule the two greatest empires of the world to-day, the British and the German — the United States, being a republic, does not enter into the comparison.

PREFACE

Charmed by this coincidence which fixed the locale of the story, I have tried to work it out on old Germanic lines; to catch in some measure, without being too archaic, the spirit of the day; and to show the characters of the people who enter into the play as they were or might have been. Therefore, while it has, I trust, a historical flavor, it is not a historical tale. Nor is it a sea-story. In fact, it is my first entry into a new field in which I promise myself the pleasure, with your encouragement, gentle readers, if I may have it, of further excursions.

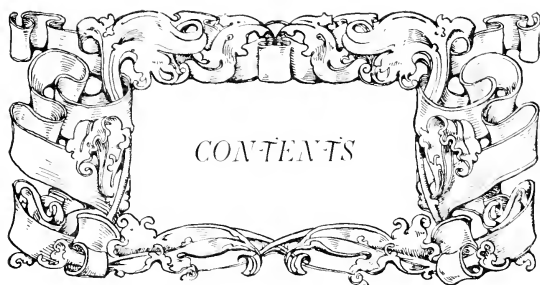
CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY.

PHILADELPHIA, PENNA.,
January 18, 1902.



Publishers' Note

*This book is an expansion of the story entitled "Bar-
barossa" which originally appeared in the
"Century Magazine."*



PROLOGUE

THE GREAT DIET AT FRANKFORT- ON-THE-MAIN

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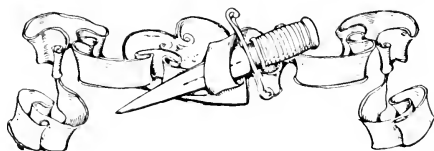
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1. **FREDERICK VON HOHENSTAUFEN** (called, from his red beard, *Barbarossa*), Duke of Swabia, King of Germany, and afterward Kaiser of the Holy Roman Empire, and the head of the Ghibellines.
2. **HENRY WELF** (called the *Lion*), Duke of Saxony and Bavaria, ancestor on the distaff side of the modern sovereigns of England, and the head of the Guelfs.
3. **CONRAD VON HOHENZOLLERN**, a noble soldier of fortune in the service of the kaiser; afterward burgrave of Nuremberg, and founder of the royal house of Prussia and the modern emperors of Germany.
4. **WILHELM DEGERBERG**, a veteran soldier, squire to Hohenzollern; afterward Baron von Degerberg, and lieutenant-governor of Nuremberg.
5. **BARON ECKHARDT**, the kaiser's confidant and commander of the imperial body-guard.
6. **DIETRICK**, a Swabian man-at-arms in the army of the Duke of Saxony.
7. **SER GIOVANNI DI FIRENZE**, one of Hohenzollern's following; a traitor.
8. **HANS**, an old soldier in Hohenzollern's service.
9. **HEINRICH**, an ancient steward to Countess Matilda.
10. **COUNT EGINHARD**, commander of the Saxon army.
11. **VON GLUYMER**, captain of the Saxon body-guard.

CHARACTERS IN THE STORY

12. ALTENBORN, captain of the Swabian body-guard.
13. Messenger of the kaiser.
14. Messenger of the electors.
15. COUNTESS MATILDA VON VOHBURG, a ward of the empire.
16. THE LADY GERTRUDE, her foster-mother and friend.

AND

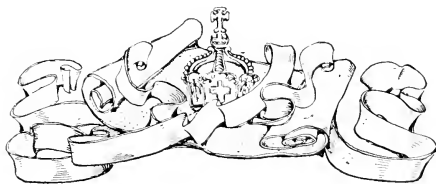
Lords and ladies of the court; Swabian, Saxon, and imperial troops; Hohenzollern's band of outlaws, etc.

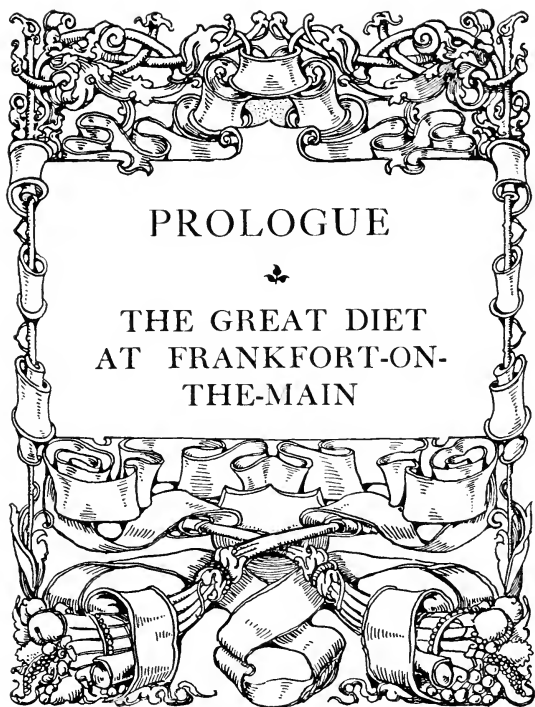
TIME, PLACE, AND DURATION OF THE STORY

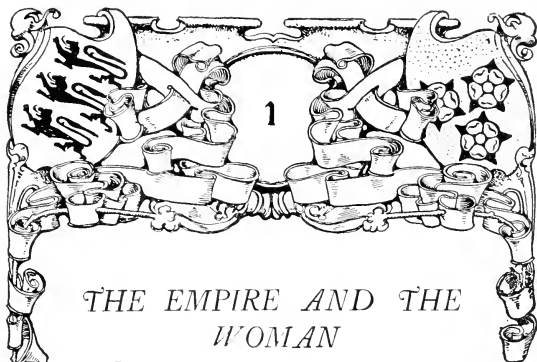
PROLOGUE. An afternoon in March, 1152 A.D., at the imperial castle in Frankfort-on-the-Main.

PARTS I-IV. A single night six months later, at

1. The castle of Vohburg,
2. The Saxon camp, and
3. The heart of the Black Forest.







THE EMPIRE AND THE WOMAN



HERE was the rustle of a dress across the floor, a dazzle of fair hair in the sunlight, the flash of a pair of blue eyes that seemed to comprehend everything in the room in one sweeping glance, a stately bow, a graceful wave of a white hand, a smile and a look, that each man appropriated to himself, which yet reached the one for whom they were designed, and the woman was gone. The little air that she disturbed in her passage was reminiscent of the fragrance of spring-time and her fresh young beauty. After

HOHENZOLLERN

she had disappeared, there lay, like a splash of blood upon the green rushes of that floor, a red rose, which had fallen from the chaplet she wore.

The room was a huge vaulted chamber in the imperial castle at Frankfort-on-the-Main. The time was late in March of the year 1152. The air was mild and balmy for the early season, and the afternoon sunlight streaming through the open casements flooded the apartment. As far as the eye could see in every direction, on the plains beyond the city wall, were encamped the armed hosts of the nations of the German people — Swabians, Saxons, Bavarians, Franks, Lorrainers, and all the rest. Above the tents of the mighty hosts waved the banners, pennons, and pencils of the nobles, great and small, of the German Kingdom and the Roman Empire; while from many a tall hotel or noble castle within the walls of the city fluttered the standards of the great dukes and princes, secular and

THE EMPIRE AND THE WOMAN

ecclesiastical, of the ancient realm of Charlemagne.

Conrad III, the Crusader, had died the month before, and the German nation—perhaps, better, the Germanic race—was assembled in this great Diet to choose his successor. He whom they should elect King of Germany would become *ex officio* Roman Cæsar, and the most powerful monarch in the world; although he could not legally assume the dignity of the latter title until he had been invested and crowned by the Roman pontiff. The delegated electors from each of the great tribal divisions of the nation were thus assembled under the presidency—saving the Pope of course—of the most powerful prelate of the day, the Archbishop of Mainz, and were even now, their deliberations having concluded, casting those ballots which should determine upon whose head should lodge the crown.

To two of the men in the room of the

HOHENZOLLERN

castle the decision of the election was of the supremest importance. Each hoped that he might be the choice of the electors, and to this end each had schemed since the emperor's death, aye, and for long time before. By bribery, cajolery, coercion, every force at the command of a medieval prince, they had striven to compass their separate ends. Yet for the moment these weighty affairs were forgotten in the emotion evoked by the passage of the woman, in whom the third man, undisturbed by imperial dreams and ambitions, was even more interested than were the other two. It was not the first time in history that crowns and principalities had been forgotten in the presence of a passing woman—nor would it be the last.

The three men were alone in the room, although beyond the hangings, in the antechamber to the right, a busy hum of conversation and the clinking of armor-clad bodies in restless motion bespoke

THE EMPIRE AND THE WOMAN

the presence of a numerous party of knights, men-at-arms, and other soldiers in waiting.

As the Countess Matilda disappeared through the opposite doorway to join the other ladies of the ducal court, two of the men in the room stepped quickly forward, and each made a motion to pick up the rose. As they recognized a common purpose, they both stopped, straightened themselves, and the right hand of each went swiftly and instinctively toward a heavy sword that dangled upon his left hip. Although all three were assembled on a supposedly peaceful errand, each man was clad in the complete armor of the period, save that the heavy war-helmet was laid aside and supplanted by the steel cap worn, in this instance, over the hood of the hauberk of linked mail.

As the two younger men assumed this threatening position toward each other, the third sat quietly down upon the huge,

HOHENZOLLERN

old-fashioned, canopied chair, on a dais projecting from the wall, which was the only seat of honor in the room. Crossing his legs and slipping his belt forward a little so that his hand rested conveniently upon the hilt of his sword, standing vertically from the floor, he bent forward and watched the others with bright and shining eyes, like a judge about to determine a case in court.

“My lord of Saxony,” spoke the younger of the two, “I claim the flower. Thou hast roses enough upon thy breast already”—alluding to his escutcheon—“to begrudge a simple soldier this fallen blossom.”

“Nay, Sir Count; like craves like, and methinks the lost flower will match my roses. It shall grace my tunic as the woman shall grace my duchy. I mean to have them both.”

“My lord,” replied the other, hotly, “roses are more easily plucked and worn than women. As to thy duchy and the

THE EMPIRE AND THE WOMAN

countess, that 's as may be. The rose is mine. I am the governor for the time of this castle, so constituted by his Highness yonder. All the treasure-trove within its walls is mine, therefore; nay, more, I dare tell you, sir, that I have won the maiden's heart, and I will claim it even as I do the flower."

"Gentle knights," said the man in the chair, "I pray you, peace. The maid is mine, and I claim both her and the rose. Count Hohenzollern, hand it to me."

"Sir, my lord!" cried the young count, hotly, stepping forward, but making no effort to pick up the flower at his lord's command. "She 's not for thee; thou hast a wife."

"Hell and furies!" exclaimed the man addressed, his face flushing with anger at the unwonted check. "Am I so likely to forget it that every liegeman must fling it in my teeth?"

"I am no liegeman of thine, Duke of Swabia," answered the Saxon, "and I

HOHENZOLLERN

repeat thy vassal's word. Thou hast a wife, and canst not in honor take the maiden."

"Who dares question the honor of the Hohenstaufen?" cried Barbarossa, with furious irrelevancy, starting to his feet as he spoke.

"I dare, if thou meanest harm to the woman I seek to wed," hotly answered the Saxon.

"No one shall question the duke's honor when I am by, unless it be myself," interrupted Count Hohenzollern, his wonted fealty to the fore again, as he sprang forward and placed himself between the Duke of Swabia and the Duke of Saxony.

"Peace, ye brawlers," said the Swabian, at last, recovering his equanimity by a violent effort. "Conrad von Hohenzollern, I have no need of thy sword yet, and you, too, are in rebellion. Stand aside, sir! And you, miscalled the Lion of Saxony, hear me. The maiden—"

THE EMPIRE AND THE WOMAN

“No thanks to thee that she yet bears that title,” growled the Saxon.

“’Sdeath, sir!” roared Hohenzollern. “Dare you impugn the honor of the lady?”

“Nay, Sir Count —”

“But your words!”

“Did I not ask her yesterday to share my throne of Saxony? Does that impugn her character, thou hothead?”

“What answer made she, sir?”

“Am I to be catechized like the Hohenstaufen? Do you thank God I am not your master, young sir.”

“I do, I do; but your answer?”

“How doth it concern thee, Sir Count?”

“Sir, I too would wed her. I love her.”

“Love! bah! ’T is a luxury not for ambition. I would administer her heritage. Yet the maid is passing fair—”

“What answer gave she to your suit?” fairly roared the count.

“No, if you will have it, and perhaps there’s reason for her refusal in thee.”

“Duke and count, ye take but little

HOHENZOLLERN

reckoning of my will, it seems," the Swabian interrupted. "When she was committed to my care by her father, the old count, upon his death-bed, she became my ward, and the disposition of her hand is vested in me by the feudal law. Hereby do I refuse ye both your suit, and I do reserve her for—myself."

He threw back his head and filled the room with mocking laughter at the discomfiture of the two men before him.

"By God, sir!" screamed the count, carried away by his passionate indignation, "I have fought for you, loved you, been your man, would have died for you! Mean you to say that you will try to make this lady—by God's death! Duke of Swabia, I will not speak the word."

"Am I to be interrogated forever by my liegemen?" retorted the Swabian. "But I'll answer thee. I would make her—what I please."

"Not while I am by, I swear," retorted Hohenzollern, desperately.

THE EMPIRE AND THE WOMAN

“I stand with the count in this,” said the Saxon duke.

“Hear me, ye fools, and understand,” roared the Duke of Swabia, furious in his turn. “Ye know there is naught but enforced hate between Adelheid, my wife, and myself. Carried away by the same passion which hath produced your present heat, once I proffered to the Countess Matilda everything I could, saving only my ducal crown.”

“And she refused you as she did me?” questioned the Duke of Saxony, triumphantly.

“By the mass!” laughed the Swabian, “with even more scorn.”

“That were meet, indeed,” rejoined he of Saxony.

“What then, sir?” queried the count.

Frederick shook his finger at his vassal.

“I shall deal with thee presently, thou questioner of thy betters.”

“The answer, the answer!” roared the

HOHENZOLLERN

count, apparently quite undismayed by this menace, and as insistent to question Swabia as he had been to force an answer from Saxony.

“I trust to my influence with the Holy Father to induce him to grant me a bill of divorcement from Adelheid, and then —”

“And if he will not?” the Saxon demanded.

“Why, by my beard, he shall —”

“But if he will not, I say?” urged the count.

“Well, then she will have to sit upon the step of the throne instead of by my side.”

“No, by Heaven, that shall never be!” cried the count. “She hath refused the Duke of Saxony’s proffer of honorable marriage, and she hath rejected with scorn and contempt thy offer of a mistress’ place. Know, my lord of Swabia, that I, a simple soldier, poor, landless, except it be for thy bounty, have won

THE EMPIRE AND THE WOMAN

her heart. Not all the dukes in the empire will I allow to take her from me.”

“Poor indeed thou art,” returned the Swabian prince, promptly, “since I do here revoke every gift and benefit which I have loaded upon thee, ingrate. Thou hast dared to love this woman upon whom I have cast my eye, sir. She is my ward, and I love her too. Landless art thou as well, since every rood of ground and every castle thou hast held of me I here take back. Naked thou camest to me, naked thou shalt go forth. Truly, as his Eminence of Mainz would say, you brought nothing into this Germany, and, by the mass! you shall take nothing out—saving the memory of my clemency.”

“Thy clemency!” retorted the count, with a scornful laugh.

“I spare thy life, young sir, and thus pay back the service thou didst me when thy body took the blow on the field of Weissenburg that was meant for me.

HOHENZOLLERN

The woman is mine, and I will have her, come what may."

"Nay; she shall be mine," cried the Saxon. "'T is duke against duke now. There is yet no emperor to whom we may make appeal, and if perchance I should be he, why—"

"Thou!" laughed the Swabian.

"My lords, both, bethink ye that, quarrel as ye may, I will win the prize; for I have the vantage of you both, in that the lady loves me. Therefore the rose is mine, and I will wear it."

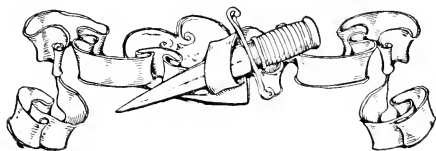
The others had drawn somewhat apart during the fierce altercation, leaving Hohenzollern a free field. As he spoke he stooped suddenly and lifted the flower from the floor. The two dukes instantly moved toward him, whipping out their swords as they came. The young count was no less quick than they. In a moment his sword was out, his back against the wall, the rose held high in the air in his lifted hand.

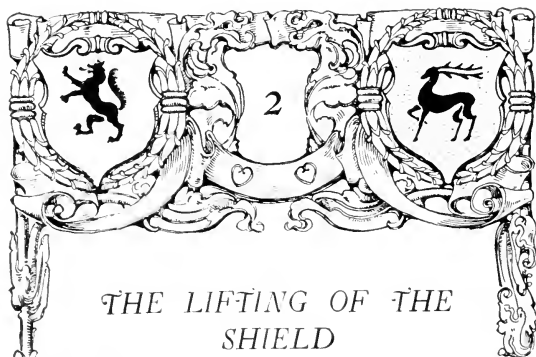
THE EMPIRE AND THE WOMAN

“I will fight ye both for it,” he cried. “I am absolved by the Duke of Swabia absolutely from any allegiance to him, and I have never owed the Saxon lord anything. Here we be but three men who love one woman. Which one shall have her? Come on, sirs: a trial at arms decides.”

“We will dispose of this claimant out of hand, my lord of Saxony,” said the Swabian, grimly, “then fight it out between ourselves. The lady first, and then the empire. And may the best man win her, as may the best man wear the crown.”

“I say amen to that. Let ’s on him.”





THE LIFTING OF THE SHIELD



ALLANT swordsman as he was, it would have gone hard with Hohenzollern before two such tried blades, had there not been a timely interruption. There was a sudden tumult in the antechamber, confused noises, shouting, trampling of feet, and clattering of steel-clad men on the stone floor. The three knights in the room paused, listening.

“The election!” burst from the lips of the Saxon.

The three sword-points dropped as if

THE LIFTING OF THE SHIELD

stricken down. The hanging arras across the opening was torn violently aside. A man panting with excitement burst into the room.

“Long live the king! Long live the king!” he cried.

In an instant the chamber was filled with nobles and courtiers, knights and guards, crowding after him. From the doorway in the other end of the long apartment, the women of the castle, who had awaited the decision of the electors with scarcely less interest than the men, poured into the room, filling their end of the chamber with beauty, to match the brave display of force on the other side. Foremost among them, like a star of the first magnitude in a nebula of lesser beauties, shone the Countess Matilda. Having stood nearest the door, she had heard the knights disputing for her person. She had taken a high resolve, and the color of it flushed her cheek and sparkled in her eyes.

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“My lords,” cried the messenger, sinking upon his knee before the two dukes, who happened to stand close together in the center of the room, while he extended a rolled parchment with dangling seals to them, “the session of the Diet is over. The election is completed, and the choice hath fallen upon —”

“Me, by Heaven!” the Saxon burst out, impetuously.

“Nay, my lord; upon the Duke of Swabia.”

“The Hohenstaufen? How!” cried the Saxon, his face red with anger and disappointment. “It cannot be!”

“My lord, his Princely Highness the Archbishop of Mainz hath declared that Frederick of Hohenstaufen hath carried the day.”

“The traitorous dog!” cried the Saxon. “’T is not true! He’s promised to me. Thou liest, sirrah!”

He made a step toward him, menacing

THE LIFTING OF THE SHIELD

him with his point. The messenger sprang to his feet.

"'T is so writ in this parchment," he cried, shaking open the scroll, "and look you, sir, 't is sealed with the archbishop's seal. Sire, my king," he added, turning to the newly elected kaiser, "protect me from the wrath of thy man."

"Thou shalt be safe under our protection. And so shall all in Germany who seek it," returned the new king, promptly. "My lord of Saxony, hold off your sword. We swear to deal justice, to dispense mercy, to all our subjects, high and low, great and small, and to protect and defend this ancient realm of Germany, aye, and the domains which will fall to us when we do put on the imperial crown, with our life's blood."

"Long live King Frederick!" cried the messenger.

"A shield! A shield, here!" shouted old Altenborn, the captain of Frederick's guard. "Let us do it in the ancient way,

HOHENZOLLERN

comrades. Up with the King of Germany."

In a moment one of the great war-shields was brought forth, and the noble figure of the king was lifted high above the crowd in the ancient hall by his sturdy men-at-arms.

"Out blades," cried Altenborn, as they raised the monarch, "and cry with me, 'Long live the king!'"

"Long live the king! Long live Frederick Barbarossa!" burst forth in a wild roar, which rang through the vaulted hall. "Long live the kaiser!" again and again. The glad acclaim rose over a wilderness of shining, uptossed weapons, waved frantically by knights and soldiers. Even the women joined in the shouting, and their voices swelled the chorus which rose and fell, echoing and reëchoing throughout the chamber.

"Homage and fealty, now, gentles," cried the captain of the guard, dropping to his knee, and lifting up the cross-

THE LIFTING OF THE SHIELD

like hilt of his sword above him. "Let us swear on the cross fidelity to our kaiser!"

His example was followed by every one in the room save the Duke of Saxony and Count Hohenzollern. The former, standing sternly erect, drew his glove from his right hand, and when the tumult stilled, hurled it crashing to the feet of the upbearers of the king, among the kneeling knights.

"I yield no homage," he cried furiously, "I swear no oath. I defy thee and all thy brood! There lies my glove, my gage of defiance! A traitor — his Lordship of Mainz was pledged to me — placed thee where thou art; an honest man, myself, shall hurl thee down! Beware our next meeting, Duke of Swabia!"

"Rise, gentles all, and let me descend," said Barbarossa, calmly, ignoring both challenge and threat. "Nay, touch not the glove. 'T is not given to subject to defy his liege lord. Let it lie. We shall

HOHENZOLLERN

know how to enforce thy obedience in good time."

He spurned it contemptuously with his foot.

"Thou durst not lift it; thou art afraid, and well thou mayest be. Remember our next meeting marks the end of thy kingship!" cried the Saxon, turning and making his way swiftly toward the door.

"Seize him! Seize him!" cried one knight after another, rising and crowding threateningly toward the duke as he roughly forced his way through the throng.

"Nay," said the king, promptly; "let him go free for the present. We would not stain this happy day by armed quarrel. We shall welcome the day we meet him again, too. Now, hath no one here a request for us?" His glance fell upon the frowning Hohenzollern. "Thou hast not knelt, Sir Count. Hast nothing to seek? We could forgive thee much—all. Hadst thou wit

THE LIFTING OF THE SHIELD

enough to abandon thy purpose, thou couldst ask anything — thy county, thy castles, those possessions which late were thine; thou shouldst be restored to our royal favor.”

There was a note almost of eagerness in the king’s words.

“Sire,” said the count, stepping forward boldly, “these are nothing. There is but one thing I would have of thee. Hear me, gentles all. I love the Countess Matilda —”

“And hear me as well,” cried the countess, stepping forward. “I love the count.”

It was a frank declaration, suited to a free, bold age, but the woman had shrewdly determined upon the public avowal which would, in a measure, commit king and court to a suit which bade fair to encounter many difficulties.

“You hear, sire! Grant me this lady to my wife, and all thy honors are cheap beside.”

HOHENZOLLERN

The kaiser's face clouded at the continued contumacy of the count, and at the frank avowal of the countess. It appeared that he was no more prosperous in his wooing as a king than he had been as a duke.

"We have other plans in view for the Lady Matilda, sir," he replied coldly. "We look higher for her than a simple count and —"

"Nay, sire ; I desire to go no higher than the count's heart," broke out the maiden.

"Peace, lady," said the king, recovering himself with difficulty. "You know not what you say. You are too great a match for a landless and proscribed man. Nay, not another word !" he cried, turning toward the count. "Out of my sight, Hohenzollern ! I have spared thy life twice. What was my lord of Saxony's word ? Beware the time I see thee again. Look to it, sir !"

The king hesitated as he turned to

THE LIFTING OF THE SHIELD

Matilda. Should he declare his purpose ? Why not ? He was king, kaiser. The monarch could do no wrong. The bold way was ever the way nearest his heart. Sweeping the room, therefore, with imperious glance, he delivered himself of these weighty words in the deep silence which had fallen upon the assemblage :

“Lords and ladies, gentles all, the Duchess Adelheid goes to a nunnery. ’T is known to all of the court how ill we have accorded in our married life. If I am to have peace in Germany I must have it at home first. That lady and I cannot live together longer in wedlock, or in any other way. Eckhardt !”

A veteran captain stepped from the crowding circle and knelt before the king.

“The parchment that we had prepared last night. Our secretary will give it thee. Take it to his Holiness at Rome. Know all that in it we crave a writ of divorcement from Dame Adelheid, our duchess, and word of when we are to be

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invested by him with our imperial crown. Success attend thee, captain. Ride hard and fast. Spare nothing. Supplement our writing with thy cunning tongue. A barony awaits thee if thou bringest us the release. The hours drag till you return. You, madam," said the king, turning toward Matilda, "will retire at once to your castle at Vohburg and there await our royal pleasure."

Silencing the woman's protest with a wave of the hand, the king's glance swept the room, falling at last on the mutinous Hohenzollern, who had not stirred.

"What, count! Still here!" he roared. "Hast not gone yet! A fool! Now, to thy sorrow, we do exercise the royal right of changing our mind. Hold him in wardship, Altenborn, but with gentle usance, till our further pleasure be declared."

"Thy sword, sir," cried the captain of the guard, advancing toward the young man; but Hohenzollern bent the blade

THE LIFTING OF THE SHIELD

across his knee, snapped it in two, and threw the pieces at the feet of the king.

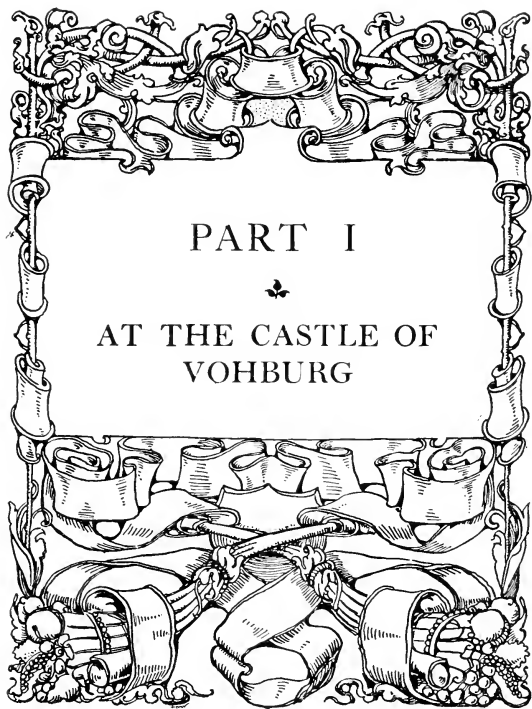
“Thou beginnest thy reign badly, sire, with injustice and oppression. Look to the end. And mark this: thou canst prison me —” he cried.

“And send me to my castle an thou wilt,” interrupted Matilda.

“—but thou canst not make me false to the love I bear this lady.”

“And I, too, shall be faithful to his love, sire. I am resolved upon it. ’T is not within the power of man to enforce a woman’s heart,” exclaimed the countess.

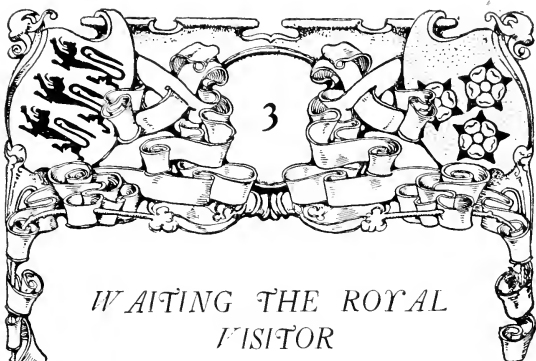
“We shall see,” said the king, smiling grimly, “what time, separation, absence, the king’s sword for the count, and the king’s crown for the countess, will do. Away with them, knights! We have parleyed too long already. I bid ye to Aix-la-Chapelle, where we will assume our royal crown. Cry with me all: ‘Long live this, our ancient German state!’ ”



PART I



AT THE CASTLE OF
VOHBURG



*WAITING THE ROYAL
VISITOR*



HECK to the queen, your
Ladyship."

"So! I'll move here."

"Nay, madam; the knight
controls that square."

"There, then, Gertrude."

"Seest thou not the threatening rook
yonder, countess?"

"Truly! But here is a last square
open — mine only chance."

"And that is menaced by the king."

"'T is so, marry! And the lady
queen is lost 'twixt king and knight and
castle and their protecting soldier pawns.

HOHENZOLLERN

Ah, me, I play indifferently to-night, Gertrude. The game is thine, methinks. Let's have done with playing."

The Countess Matilda von Vohburg pushed the board aside slowly and abandoned herself to retrospection. Her waiting-woman rose from the table, stepped nearer to her, and watched her in affectionate anxiety.

"King, knight, duke — and I am lost between," murmured the countess, sadly. "Six months gone since that day in Frankfort, and no word hath come. I am here alone. No tidings of the count reach me. Is he still in ward? What will be the end? My castle stripped of its defenders by the king's orders — helpless, I, like a timid bird waiting for the swoop of the unhooded falcon, helpless and alone, and a woman —"

"My sweet lady, my foster-child, I am with thee," cried the waiting-woman, kneeling by her side.

"Thou alone art left of all my people.

WAITING THE ROYAL VISITOR

Aye, a faithful heart; but thou art a woman too, aye, and an old woman who nursed me when a child. More helpless thou than I, good foster-mother. We be but two women alone in a great castle: 't is men we need, 't is men we crave."

"Or a man, Lady Matilda."

"Aye, a man; thou knowest my heart. The lord count, I mean. Oh, Blessed Virgin, to be so helpless! But leave me, faithful Gertrude. I would be alone a little. Retire thou; I will unrobe myself this night. Rest if thou canst, old friend, and pray for thy poor mistress ere thou sleepest. Alas, two women only—and alone! Nay, plead not; I need no service. Go; I 'll follow thee presently. 'T is early for the young yet, but thou needest rest."

The Lady Gertrude, not daring to disobey orders so peremptory, bent low over her mistress' hand, left a kiss upon it, and reluctantly withdrew to her own apartment at the other side of the castle, far removed from the great hall.

HOHENZOLLERN

Leaving the carved ivory chessmen standing upon their squares, the Countess Matilda presently rose from the table, and—for the autumn night was chill—stepped over to the fire of great logs crackling and blazing in the huge fireplace which, with its massive mantle and huge chimney, nearly filled one side of the room.

She stood in silence, gazing at the flames, twisting her hands together from time to time in a gesture of mingled perplexity and anxiety. Presently her meditations were interrupted by the entrance of her old steward.

“Your Ladyship,” he began, bowing respectfully.

“What is it, Heinrich?” she answered, turning toward him.

“A horseman hath arrived, a messenger from our lord the king.”

“From the king!” she exclaimed, in great surprise and agitation. “Is he then near our castle?”

WAITING THE ROYAL VISITOR

“But a short distance away to the eastward he lies encamped with all his power, madam; so said the soldier who craves an audience of your Ladyship.”

“Admit him instantly. But stay; have you learned where the Duke of Saxony is?”

“Marching toward the castle from the westward, your Ladyship.”

“We are like to be crushed between these millstones, alas! And Count Hohenzollern—what of him? Have you heard aught of him?”

“Nothing yet, madam,” answered the old man, regretfully, knowing the whole sad story and pitying his mistress with all his heart.

“Always nothing! Well, you may go and send hither the messenger, then.”

The countess, left alone again, walked across the rush-strewn floor to the dais against the wall opposite the fireplace. She seated herself in the great carved chair with the wolf's head hanging above

HOHENZOLLERN

it, and there awaited the arrival of the king's despatch-bearer. When he came into the hall she signed to him to approach nearer, and, as he knelt lowly before her, she received from him without question the bulky parcel sealed with the imperial lions. Dismissing the soldier with an inclination of her head, she waited in assumed calmness until he had left the hall. As he disappeared behind the tapestry hangings, however, her seeming indifference was abandoned, and with eager, impatient hands she broke the seal, tore off the confining ribbons of the wrapping, and opened the packet.

The Countess Matilda had been well educated. She was able to read — nay, more, to read somewhat rapidly and with ease. A few moments, therefore, sufficed to put her in possession of the brief message scrawled in great, ungainly characters across the sheet of parchment. She read it over again, frowning with displeasure as she did so, although it con-

WAITING THE ROYAL VISITOR

veyed an intimation of an honor which most subjects would have prized highly.

The document, although purporting to be only an announcement, was in effect a royal order. It informed her that his Majesty the emperor purposed visiting the castle of Vohburg that night, and begged that due preparation on the part of the countess might be made to receive him. It was signed by that name which, though it was but little known at the time, was destined to become one of the most famous in history.

There were many other more important things than these, however, which the message did not explicitly state, but which it nevertheless conveyed in a perfectly unmistakable way to the Countess Matilda, and doubtless it was these unwritten facts which ruffled the brow of the fair lady; and it was these unwelcome tidings which caused her to spring to her feet and descend from the dais while she proceeded to crumple and crush

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the inoffensive parchment between her strong white hands. Her apprehension of what was behind the letter it was, surely, that so clouded the hospitality of a loyal subject to her king.

The blow was about to fall, then. Her six months' respite was over. The king had been busy getting himself crowned, and the details of his inauguration had kept him occupied during the intervening time. Now he was free, and was coming to her. The moment she had dreaded to face was at hand. The decision from which she had shrunk would be forced upon her that night.

The countess was alone in the world, save for her admirers, and they were many. The last of a great and ancient race, the representative of a proud and distinguished line, the mistress in her own right of vast possessions, she was one of the most desirable of women, from a matrimonial point of view, in Germany, or even in the Roman Em-

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pire. In addition to all these advantages, Heaven had endowed her with a magnificent person, which did not diminish her potential value.

A regal picture she made standing tall and splendid in the great vaulted room. She wore a tight-fitting bodice, which emphasized, rather than concealed, every swelling curve and rounded outline of her noble figure. Her skirt was confined by a loose belt studded with gems, which fell low over the hips in front, and over which the kirtle dropped in graceful folds. The fabric of her dress was of rich silver tissue, and embroidered upon it in vivid scarlet were the rampant wolves of the Vohburgs. The underskirt she wore, which swept the rush-covered stone flagging of the hall, was of blue cloth; and soft, heelless cloth shoes, richly jeweled, covered her shapely, if not very small, feet. Her bodice, which was bordered with scarlet, was cut square at the neck above her

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magnificent bust, disclosing a throat of dazzling whiteness; her thick blond hair was confined about her brows by a band, or fillet, of gold, mounted with rudely cut turquoises, and, being brought forward, fell far down her breast in two long, heavy braids.

Pride, strength, power, were stamped on her noble features, sparkled in her eyes, quivered in her nostrils, curled in her lips, flushed in her cheeks. She appeared as Britomart or Brunhilde might have looked — typically German, splendidly strong, brilliantly fair, yet possessing, in addition to all this, a subtle something that proclaimed her, in tenderness and love, a very woman indeed. For all her size and strength, her movements were as graceful, her step was as light, her carriage as easy, as that of a swan in the water or of a bird in the air. She stood forth a heroic woman for a historic age, a potential mother for Homeric races of medieval days.

WAITING THE ROYAL VISITOR

The recently elected kaiser, as we have seen, was madly in love with her, although a married man was Frederick when he first realized his passion for his noble ward. According to the feudal law, and by the will of her father as well, she had been left to the guardianship of that fountain of honor, the then Duke of Swabia. She had grown to womanhood in Wai-
blingen, at the court of the Hohenstau-
fens, and it was not until Frederick had been for some time married to the noble Adelheid—a marriage of policy and convenience, be it said, which had produced nothing but misery to both parties—that he became aware of her match-
less beauty.

With the easy morality of the age—and indeed of any age, so far as kings have been concerned—he had at once offered her the questionable position of mistress of his heart, a dubious offer which she spurned with the native purity of her Teutonic race. Frederick, in-

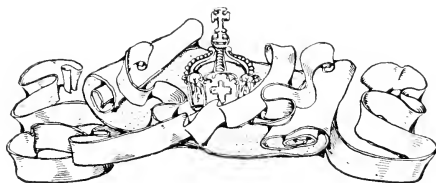
HOHENZOLLERN

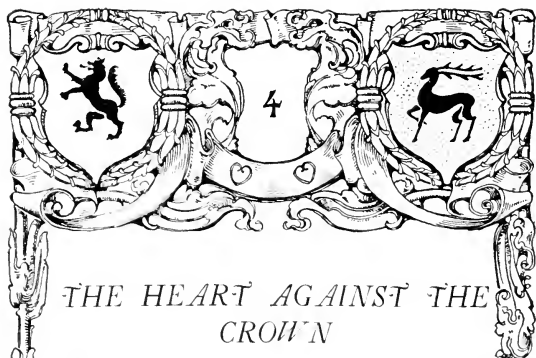
cited by her opposition, and rendered more determined than ever by the bitter jealousy and consequent upbraiding of his unhappy queen, had persisted in his attention to the helpless and equally unhappy countess, and his passion had only grown stronger under all the opposition with which it had been received. Finally, carried beyond all reason by the fervor of his feelings,—for he was still a young man, although he had been elected king and emperor,—he had actually attempted to secure, by the complaisance of the Pope, a divorce from his unfortunate wife, in order that he might marry his lovely ward.

The Vicegerent of Heaven did not yet wish to break with the rising sun of secular power, and precipitate that long struggle between church and state which did not end until the waters of the swollen Kalykadnos River closed over the head of the dying Crusader-emperor; therefore the king's efforts had been successful.

WAITING THE ROYAL VISITOR

Although the countess had not yet been informed of all this, she divined, on receipt of his message, that he was at last free, in the eyes of the law or the church, and that he was coming that night to propose that she should become his wife.





*THE HEART AGAINST THE
CROWN*



HE dazzling prospect before her — for there had been no secrecy about the kaiser's plans — had not charmed her. She had rejoiced that the absence of the emperor on an expedition to bring into submission some of the refractory nobles of the great empire, which he held at that time by no very certain tenure, had freed her for a space from his importunities and threats, and given her a short respite in her own castle, whither she had gone in compliance with his orders. It is not probable, however, that even a

HEART AGAINST CROWN

woman of the heroic mold of the Countess Matilda would have been able, or indeed willing, to reject an alliance of so brilliant a character if, with the perversity of women of all ages, she had not fallen madly in love with another man. Her love for him had been avowed before the whole court on that election day of the Diet at Frankfort.

It had been some years now since the young Count Conrad von Hohenzollern—destined to be the founder of a most illustrious line, and whose descendants would in time themselves wear the imperial purple—had come riding down, like the simple soldier of fortune he was, from the high mountains from which, as a younger son, he took his name. He had been attended by a single esquire, and had carried all his earthly possessions on his person in the shape of his lance, his sword, and his armor. He had entered the service of the powerful Duke of Swabia, in whose following, in those

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turbulent days, there was always room for a good blade. By his prowess and courage he had found favor with his ducal master until he ventured to eclipse the royal sun in his attempt to enkindle the flame of love in the heart of the Countess Matilda.

A rivalry none the less intense because between monarch and man had presently arisen between them, and in the castle hall at Frankfort it had finally broken forth. There Hohenzollern had presumed to cross the will of the new emperor. Forgetful of the obedience due to his liege lord, he refused to stand aside, and had persisted in his suit. The king, doing a little forgetting on his own account and disregarding the fact that the young count should receive every consideration from him because he had saved his master's life in one of the border frays of the period, had become so incensed at him that he deprived him of his offices, abrogated his privileges,

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stripped him of his emoluments, withdrew the grants he had made, nullified the rewards he had given him, and left him penniless; nay, more, he had kept him a close prisoner ever since. Unmindful of all these things, or rather in despite of them, Count Conrad had persisted in his love, and had intrenched himself so firmly in the affections of the countess that the emperor was almost forced to acknowledge himself beaten. Finally, a week before this day, the count had escaped, and though he had been sought for vigorously was still at large.

One weapon yet remained to the king, and having made use of it, he felt that he had indeed launched the last bolt in his quiver. He put Hohenzollern under the ban of the empire, releasing all his personal followers, if any were left, from their allegiance to him, making it lawful for any one to take him prisoner and deliver him to the monarch, promising

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rich reward therefor, and, in case of resistance, full immunity if the unlucky count were killed. Hohenzollern was made an outlaw among men from that day forth, a wanderer and a vagabond on the face of the earth, with no asylum anywhere. After perpetrating this ingenious piece of infamy, the emperor promptly despatched the letter in question to the Countess Matilda. Having, as he considered, disposed of Hohenzollern, it was evident that he purposed coming himself and securing the person, if not the heart, of the object of his passion.

Nothing further had been heard by Matilda from the Duke of Saxony. He had retired in furious rage to his principality, where he had raised the standard of revolt and had been busy embodying his power. Frederick had not lost sight of him, however. He intended to deal with him presently. But first he was for Matilda and her hand.

HEART AGAINST CROWN

Things boded ill for the countess. Standing alone in the great hall of the ancient castle, in the flickering, uncertain light of lamp and torch, she looked a fitting part of the ancient picture, as she thought hard and desperately as to what should be done.

Her castle of Vohburg was a strong one, but for many reasons resistance would be impossible. She had not anticipated the visit; the place was not provisioned for a siege or garrisoned for defense. Indeed, there was no one there save a few old servants and lackeys. Her feudal retainers, her guards and troopers, were then actually with the army of the kaiser. Also it was too late to fly. She had no place to which she could escape, except the gloomy heart of the Black Forest, which stretched far to the southward of the castle, and even that she could not try unaccompanied. The Schwarzwald was the haunt of every rascal and vagrant in the empire ;

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there her life alone would scarce be worth a moment's purchase. She was helpless.

As for Conrad von Hohenzollern, his case was indeed desperate. The course of their true love ran rough over rocks, and their hopes bade fair to end in utter disaster. Still, she did not entirely give up. In spite of herself, there yet remained to her some lingering faith in the kaiser. She did not know that Conrad von Hohenzollern had escaped; she had not yet, in fact, become aware that he was under the ban of the empire; she knew that he was in disgrace for her sake, and she believed him to be a prisoner—that was bad enough.

There was nothing for her to do, she concluded despairingly at last, but to wait, and to do what she could by matching her woman's wit against the kaiser's power. Women of her stamp are not good waiters. Patience was left out of her fiery soul. The impotent helplessness

HEART AGAINST CROWN

of her position exasperated her beyond measure. She threw the crumpled letter from her hand, and tramped restlessly up and down the length of the long room.

The apartment was sparsely furnished. A rough, bare table, a few rudely carved, uncomfortable chairs, a settle and some stools, were lost in the dim, bare expanse. In one neglected corner stood a dusty spinning-wheel, evidently not a favorite article with the countess. Here and there on the walls, where the quaint tapestry, or the hangings of skins of wild beasts, slain by former lords, gave space, hung rude suits of armor and the massive weapons of the period.

There was her father's mighty sword. She stopped before it, and drew it from its scabbard. Grasping it by the shining blade, she poised it lightly in the air, some vain fleeting hope filling her breast. A modern woman could scarce have lifted the huge brand, yet she mastered

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it easily, and indeed was not without some skill in the rude fence of the day; but she could do nothing against a warrior like Barbarossa.

“Give me blade rather than distaff!” she cried at last, thrusting the sword reluctantly back into its sheath. “Oh that I were a man! I would — but an I were a man there would be no need for doing. I would be nothing to the kaiser nor to Duke Henry nor to Count Conrad. Oh that he were here! He hath sworn thousands of times he loved me, and splintered many lances in the tourney in my honor, and now when I want him most he is a captive. But that ’s not his fault. How nobly he defied king and duke in Frankfort — and for me! Oh, my love, my love, how will it end?”

She put her head in her hands, leaned against the mantel, and wept like any other woman. Presently drying her eyes, she stepped over to the table, and, with

HEART AGAINST CROWN

the hilt of a dagger which she drew from a sheath hanging at her side, struck a sharp blow upon a metal gong standing thereon. Immediately the arras parted, and the gray-haired majordomo bowed before her to receive her commands.

“The emperor stops here to-night, Heinrich. Make what preparation you can with the little that we have here,” she cried.

“Comes he alone, your Highness, or with much retinue?”

“I know not. But stay; hand me yon parchment,” she added. Unfolding the crumpled message once more as the steward obeyed her, she continued: “His Majesty writes me that he will be accompanied by only one attendant, Baron Eckhardt. He hath returned, then, and in success, I wonder? See that all needful be done, sir. The messenger who arrived a moment since — hath he been provided for?”

“He hath drunk deep in the refectory,

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your Highness, and is gone but a moment since."

"'T is well. See that nothing you can compass be lacking for the emperor's welcome. Go!"

After the old man left her, the countess sank down on a low stool, clasped her hands in her lap, and, leaning forward, gazed into the crackling fire.

The night wind howled around the old turrets of the castle, and the rain drum-tapped on the long lancet-windows, new-filled with horn to keep out the coming cold. In an hour, perhaps, the emperor would be there. She would be alone, helpless, in his hands. What might not happen then? It was a barbarous age, and might meant right more often than not, especially with a king. When power, desire, and opportunity were conjoined, little care was had of consequence. She was a bold, resolute woman, but she shivered at the dire possibilities of the situation. Presently a relieving thought

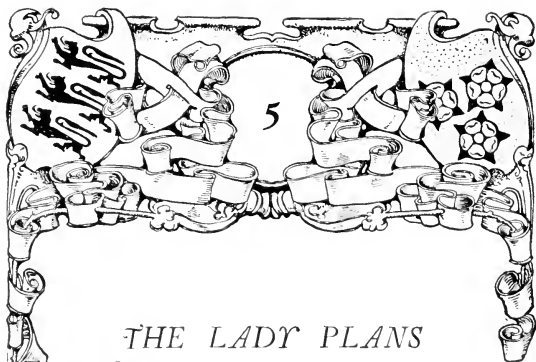
HEART AGAINST CROWN

came to her. She was not quite helpless, after all; she had a refuge. She unclasped her fingers and slipped her dagger from its sheath again. It was a rare Spanish blade, Toledo-tempered, keen and true. The firelight played fitfully on its polished surface. Although it lay in a woman's palm, it was a man's weapon. With that in hand, at least she was master of destiny — in the end.

“Daggers and love,” she murmured sadly; “they go not well together by right, I think. And yet — oh that I were a man, or that my knight were here! Where is the count? Why comes he not in this my hour of need?”

As she spoke she was aware of a clinking step in the antechamber to the hall, a vibrant ringing as of rustling links of steel. She sprang to her feet, dagger still in hand, her soul aflame for resistance, defense, death, if need be.

“So early!” throbbed her beating heart. “It cannot be!”



THE LADY PLANS



HE tapestry was parted again. A tall, blond giant, in full war panoply of linked mail, stepped lightly within the room. The hood, or coif, of his hauberk was thrown back upon his shoulders. As he entered he removed the ogival-pointed cap of burnished steel which covered his light-brown curls. Then he allowed the heavy, pointed war-shield that he carried to slip from his left arm and rest against the wall. His sleeveless blue surcoat, open at the breast, was richly embroidered with a royal

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golden stag passant, the heraldic cognizance of his princely house; the same device appeared painted on the face of his shield.

His legs and feet were covered with the same ringed mail, and on his heels he wore the golden spurs of knighthood. He carried no weapons save a heavy sword and a dagger swinging from a loose belt; his lance, ax, and cumbrous war-helmet he had left outside with his steed. Raindrops sparkled on the polished iron of his equipment. The light showed a fair face, red-cheeked, handsome, bold.

He set down his steel cap, tore the iron-plated gauntlets from his hands, threw them on a stool, and extended his arms toward the maiden, such a look of passionate devotion in his laughing gray eyes as filled her heart with flooding feeling.

"Oh," she cried, running toward him, her joy and relief at his presence shining in her face, "is it thou, at last?"

HOHENZOLLERN

“Didst not expect me, sweet?” answered the man, smiling buoyantly down upon her as he swept her to his heart.

“Expect thee? Thou wert a prisoner?”

“Nay; I escaped a week ago.”

“A week free, and you come to me only to-day!” she cried reproachfully, drawing back.

“Nay, sweet love; I have been hounded like a wolf by the king.”

With a murmur of love and pity she clasped him in her arms and boldly kissed him.

“Thy life in peril, and for me, my love!”

“Nay, dearest lady; I am free now, and with thee. Hast seen old Degerberg and my men? I told him to gather them and meet me here. And the king? Know you aught of him?”

After a moment of rapturous embrace she drew away from him slightly, and

THE LADY PLANS

lovingly gazed at him while she answered his question :

“Aye; his Majesty comes here to-night.”

“To-night ?” he cried in amazement, releasing her in sudden, jealous suspicion.

“Yes, Sir Count, to-night, the king comes — but not the king of my heart,” she added daringly.

“Lady Matilda !” he cried, opening his arms again, and as she fled therein he fairly crushed her against his mail-clad breast.

She loved to feel the cold touch even of that hard iron over that iron heart, since it beat for her alone.

“Conrad,” she said at last, clinging passionately to him, “I have longed for thee. Thou comest in a fitting hour. The kaiser hath succeeded in his plan to divorce the noble Adelheid, I feel sure. He rides here to-night to — to claim me.”

“And dost thou not belong to me, sweetheart ?”

HOHENZOLLERN

“Yea, lord, thou knowest it; and no power on earth could pluck thee from my heart.”

“But think you, lady, how I stand in the new empire.”

“What matters that?”

“Disgraced; fled from the court in fear of my life; stripped of honors and emoluments — a poor match indeed for thee, noble Matilda,” he answered, slightly releasing her as he spoke.

“Thou hast still my heart,” answered the countess, looking up at him with swimming eyes.

“Rich indeed in that am I. And, in truth, I had naught but sword and armor, steed and squire, when I came over the mountains to serve this Redbeard,” he added gloomily. “With them I can at least go back again to the eyrie of my fathers, there to defy the world.”

“Thou shalt take back with thee a wife, an thou wilt, lord, even though she come to thee but empty-handed.”

THE LADY PLANS

"Know, sweet maiden," answered the count, his face flushed, his eyes filled with thankfulness, "that not even the empire itself would I exchange for thy possession. Give me but thyself and the world may go its way. I shall be envied."

Their lips met again, but their embrace was suddenly interrupted.

"Pardon, lord," exclaimed a deep, gruff voice, as another huge figure, clad in complete armor like to but less rich than that of his master, entered the room. He was a gray-mustached veteran of great size and strength, who seemed to carry his years as lightly as if he had been a boy. A heavy iron battle-ax swung easily in his hand.

"Degerberg!" exclaimed the count, releasing the lady and turning quickly. "You here!"

"You ordered me to meet you here, sir," answered the soldier, tersely. "I am come."

HOHENZOLLERN

“What news?”

“This, lord,” replied the grizzled warrior, thrusting a parchment into his master’s hand. “I tore it from the wall in Waiblingen this morning, where a scrivener read it to a gaping crowd of churls and villains.”

“Read it, thou, fair countess; thou hast more skill in the cunning characters than a rude soldier,” said the count, handing the paper to her.

Hohenzollern could at least write his name, and could manage, albeit with some difficulty, to indite a letter or spell out a document if he had plenty of time, but he had not the fluency of the lady.

“Sir, the ban of the empire!” she cried, dismayed, as her eye glanced over the parchment. “A price on thy head, exile, death!”

She dropped the proclamation, and turned to him, terrified.

“Is ’t so?” cried Conrad, his face flushing darkly. “The emperor begins hard-



“ ‘ Sir, the ban of the empire!’
she cried, dismayed.”

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ily. A ban! By the mass, the empire stretches everywhere, and now I have no haven!"

"Save in my heart," answered Matilda, devotedly.

"And in mine," echoed old Degerberg.

"What, old friend!" cried Conrad, turning to his old servitor again, and smiling bitterly. "I cannot fight against this. Take my sword and make me prisoner. Deliver me up. Thou shalt gain rich reward, honors —"

"Master," burst out the veteran, fiercely, "stop! Say you so to me? By Heaven, sir, if I take thy sword under such dishonorable terms it would be but to pass it through my heart!"

"He speaks well," said Matilda. "Keep thy sword, noble Conrad. In the last event we can at least use it together. Death — mine and thine — the power of the empire goes not beyond."

"Here are love and friendship," said

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the count, extending his hands to sweetheart and servitor, "things men find hard to leave behind. But the blow is crushing. An outlaw in the world! And for no cause but loving thee, lady. By Heaven, I 'll seek service with the Turk!"

"Better death than allegiance to the foul Mahound, my lord," answered Matilda, softly.

"Rememberest thou not, my lord," said Degerberg, promptly, "that we have sworn, when time serves, to take the Cross to win back the Christ His Holy Sepulcher from the thieving dogs of Saracens?"

"Thou speakest truly; yet it were better done with life then. Left without a foot of ground upon which to stand, without a coign of vantage upon which even to wait attack!" He spoke gloomily, and as his eyes fell upon the set of chessmen upon a table, he added, with an assumption of his former lightness:

THE LADY PLANS

“The emperor hath beaten me. ’T is new chess. The king hath checked the knight.”

“Then let the knight take the king!” cried Matilda, boldly.

“Nay, love; ’t is not permitted in chess, according to the rule.”

“Aye, but in war — and in love.”

“The maid speaks well, sir,” responded the veteran. “There are left us some twenty bold men whom not even the ban of empire can turn against thee. I have brought them here; they wait without. With twenty men, and thee and me, lord, much may be done. They have eaten thy bread and salt. Their fathers have served for centuries in the castle upon the hill whence we came. They are thy men. Where you say strike, they strike.”

“Even against the king?”

“Against the empire, against the Holy Father himself,” exclaimed the old soldier, recklessly.

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"Thou blasphemer!" cried the young count, horrified.

"Doubtless," answered the old man, hardily. "Bid me blaspheme for thee an thou wilt, and I 'll e'en do it."

"Silence!" thundered the count, sternly. "To the oratory yonder, and say a prayer for forgiveness. I would not have thy damnation on my soul. Meanwhile I will consider."

As old Degerberg, shaking his head, but not daring disobedience to orders so positive, turned to leave, his master called after him:

"When thou hast said thy prayer, dismount the men and bring them hither."

"My prayers will be short, then, I fear, craving your pardon," answered the old man, smiling at the prospect of action.

"See that they be the more fervent, then," the count called out as he disappeared; then, turning to Matilda, he continued: "Your suggestion is a noble

THE LADY PLANS

one, and a hardy, dearest lady, and perhaps our only safety. But how bring it about?"

"Hast thou forgot this letter?" she answered, picking up the royal message. "The kaiser writes he will be here to-night, alone and unattended save by Baron Eckhardt. You have a force devoted to you. Take him in the hall. Conceal yourselves behind the arras; there is room for all the men. I will meet him alone here, make one last appeal to his knightly heart, and if that fail, at the favorable moment I will give a signal, and —"

"Aye, but when we take him, what then? I have no cage strong enough to hold so big a bird."

"The gloomy forest lies over there," she answered, pointing. "Within its confines are thousands of trackless glades, unknown shelters, where we can hold the kaiser."

"And the Duke of Saxony, how deal with him?"

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“One trouble at a time, Sir Count. When in his captivity we have wrung the kaiser’s consent to our marriage, enforced his revocation of the ban, as the price of liberty, we will free him and leave him to deal with the duke. I’ll warrant Saxony will feel his heavy hand.”

“Enough; thy woman’s wit hath solved the problem. And — didst say ‘we,’ sweet?”

“Aye,” answered the countess, bravely. “What haven is there, would there be, in any case, for me save in your arms? Whom have I now but thee? Whither thou goest I will go.”

“The kaiser would deny thee nothing,” he cried, looking at her standing gloriously before him.

“He shall not have the opportunity. Sooner than sue for his pardon or favor, I would —”

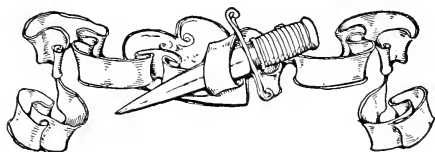
She hesitated; her glance fell to the dagger at her side.

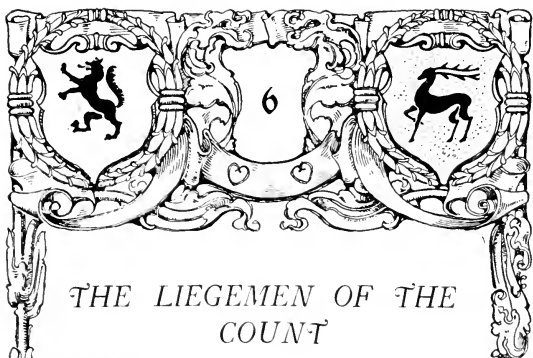
“My brave countess!” cried Hohen-

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zollern, following her glance and divining her thought.

“’T was in my hand when you entered the hall,” she whispered from the shelter of his circling arm. “Didst thou not see? Hadst thou not come, sooner than yield to the emperor, I should have sheathed it in my heart.”





THE LIEGEMEN OF THE COUNT



At this moment Degerberg reëntered the hall. There was a busy tumult in the antechamber.

“Thy orisons, Degerberg?” demanded the count.

“Performed, your Lordship. The men are there at your command.”

“By your leave, fair lady, may I not have them in here?” asked Conrad.

“Gladly. This poor house — and I — are yours. Do what you will.”

“Bid them enter,” said Hohenzollern to Degerberg, who had watched the

THE LIEGEMEN OF THE COUNT

Countess Matilda with a grim look of approbation.

He stepped into the hall, and presently came back with the troop crowding upon his heels. There were old veterans there, and younger men, sons of gray-haired sires who had followed the Hohenzollerns long since, and had gone to their rest, leaving a heritage of service to their children; and all looked hardy, bold, and resolute.

“Men,” cried the count, as they ranged themselves about the three, “this lady is the Countess Matilda von Vohburg. The kaiser, whose ward she is, is in love with her. I too — as who could help it? — have given her my heart, and unwisely hath she chosen to bestow her affections upon me, and so hath slighted the kaiser. You know the tale; because I would not give up the woman of my heart, he hath stripped me of every honor and left me penniless and alone, save for old Degerberg and ye.”

“Thou wilt find us with thee wherever

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thou goest, Sir Count," answered Hans, the old sergeant of the little company.

"Say ye all so?"

"Aye; so say we all, sir," came in a ready chorus from the men. Some of them struck their swords hanging at their sides, and the words burst forth with a brave sound of ringing steel.

"Here are true hearts indeed. But wait; ye have not heard the worst. I am this day put under the ban of the empire. Degerberg, your captain, hath brought the proclamation. Attention, all, while the countess reads!"

How much of the language of the proclamation the rude men understood as the Countess Matilda translated it to them may be imagined; but they heard enough to realize that their master was branded an outlaw, and the news served to stir in their sturdy breasts naught but rage and indignation. Oaths and cries of "Shame!" broke from them as the reading finished.

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“Now, my men, you have heard,” continued Conrad, his face lighting up with pleasure at these manifestations of devotion. “You have been true to me since you entered my service. I now release you from your obligations. You may go back to your brothers on the mountains at Zollern. Nay, more than this: if there be one among you who would secure the favor of the empire by delivering me to the kaiser, here am I—let him stand forth.”

It was a bold appeal. A look of avarice shone in the dark eyes of an Italian mercenary, the only foreign member of the band; but in the face of the vehement protestations of the others he joined in their acclamations.

“Well for ye,” said old Degerberg, presently, lifting his battle-ax, “that no one hath decided to step out to betray his Lordship, for I would have stricken him down.”

“That ’s well, brave men,” said the

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count, his face mantling with pleasure again; "but an you stay with me, know that I shall require of you great service. I purpose not to lie and rot under this ban; to be at the chance of hazard; to allow any one to strike at me and I not strike back. The emperor hath thrown himself against me in the final issue. The Hohenzollern hath nothing left but God — and thou, fair lady. Men, I take the king. Are ye with me?"

There was a momentary hesitation as the stupendous nature of the proposition dawned upon the men. The count stood with careless indifference before them, his eye, however, taking in every shade of emotion that swept across every feature. The Countess Matilda stood erect by his side with clasped hands, a world of entreaty in her face gone pale with the stress of the moment. Old Degerberg, with clenched teeth and battle-ax still quivering in his mighty hand, waited

THE LIEGEMEN OF THE COUNT

grimly for dissenting voices. It was a rare picture in the firelight.

“Master,” said the spokesman of before, “we are thy men. We will follow thee to hell an thou sayest. What ’s king or empire to us if thou art here? Say I well, comrades?”

“Aye, well indeed. We are thine. What wouldst thou have us to do, lord?”

“First, flagons of Rhenish,” cried Matilda, striking the gong and giving quick direction to her steward on his entrance; “and then get ye behind the arras. The king comes here alone to-night to take me. He ’s likelier to lose his head than win me under thy protection, my ’brave friends. Ye are to come forth when commanded by his Lordship,—then for the Black Forest! We will form the court of his Majesty; every man shall be a noble; and we will keep him there until he make us free.”

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“A health, men,” cried old Degerberg, lifting his flagon, “to the noble Conrad of Hohenzollern and the most gracious lady the Countess Matilda! May she soon mate with the eagle in his eyrie, and give to the world men with the courage of their father and women with the beauty of their mother, whom may we all live long to serve!”

“I thank you,” answered the countess, joyously, lifting her own silver goblet. “Here ’s to the valiant men who cannot be forced from their allegiance by the threat of empire. I thank you for your gracious words,” she continued, smiling, no whit abashed by the frankness of the ancient servitor’s speech. “Thou wilt permit me, Conrad?” she added, extending her hand to old Degerberg, who bent low over it, brushing it with his grizzled lips.

“Certainly, lady; ’t is noble of thee. We are to be devoted together, perhaps to the death. Therefore, come forward,

THE LIEGEMEN OF THE COUNT

men, and pledge your lady on her fair hand."

It was a great condescension for that day, and the men appreciated the significance of the unusual privilege as they knelt before the countess and humbly kissed her extended hand and then disappeared in the appointed places of their concealment. The Italian came last, and bent over the hand with the grace and fervency of his courtly nation. As he crossed the room and took his place with the others, the countess frowned and rubbed her hand, remarking :

"I like not that dark-visaged man."

"He is least to be depended upon, perhaps," answered the count, lightly ; "but what can one do among so many ?"

"'T was but a single man who betrayed our Lord," answered Matilda, gravely.

"Well, dearest, 't is too late now."

"Captain Degerberg," said the countess, "please you go to the anteroom and

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inform old Heinrich that after he hath admitted the kaiser he is to disappear with the other servants, so that they will neither see nor know aught of the happenings. I would not involve them in our peril."

"Degerberg, old friend," said the count, extending his hand, "when thou hast finished thy task, bid the men pray and make ready for the chance of death, for sure never before did a score of men and one woman engage in so desperate an enterprise."

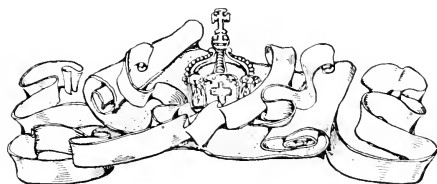
Left alone together, the two lovers stood in quiet embrace before the fire, whispering sweet nothings and exchanging caresses in spite of the seriousness of the issue soon to be determined. What crisis can steel the pulse of youth or dim the fire of love?

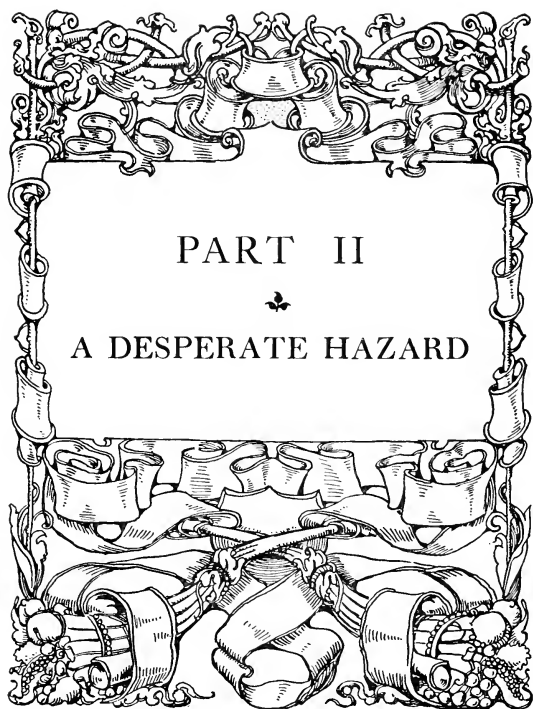
"Sweetheart," said the count at last, withdrawing from her embrace, "I hear the trampling of horses without. The king comes. Another kiss. I leave thee here

THE LIEGEMEN OF THE COUNT

until thou dost call me. Hesitate not too long; let not majesty lay upon thy loved person a soiling hand."

With a kiss upon her lips, the count withdrew from the hall.

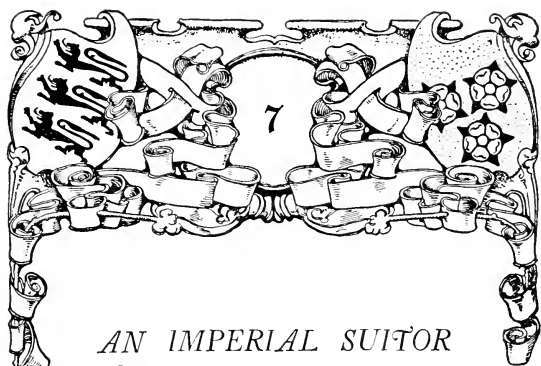




PART II



A DESPERATE HAZARD



AN IMPERIAL SUITOR



EFT alone in the vast apartment, the Countess Matilda made ready to meet the king. In that she was a Christian, she sent a swift prayer to Heaven for succor in this time of need; in that she came of a race of warriors, she loosened the dagger that hung at her side; and in that she was a woman, she gave a furtive pat or two to the golden hair under the diadem about her forehead, more by guess than otherwise, for she lacked a mirror in the castle; and then she waited.

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Horses came to a restless stop in the courtyard; men dismounted. She heard again the ringing tread on the pavement; in the antechamber a deep voice issued a sharp command:

“See that the horses are lodged and fed. You, Eckhardt, are thirsty after your long wet ride. You may repair to the refectory with the house-steward here, and when you have finished take guard in the antechamber. Admit no one. We like not this strange silence, Sir Steward. There be but few to welcome the king!”

“He gives orders like a master and a monarch already,” murmured the countess, within.

“And, knave, your mistress,” continued the masterful voice — “where is she? I like not this cold welcome, I say!”

“Your Majesty,” returned the old steward, humbly, “my lady awaits you within the hall. Your Majesty’s arrival

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was so sudden — our men are even now with your Majesty's army — that I crave your pardon for the seeming poverty of our hospitality. It comes from no lack of loyalty to your Majesty."

"Peace! Show me the way."

Again the hanging curtain masking the doorway was lifted by the majordomo, who drew it back and stood at attention, announcing in a loud voice:

"His Majesty the Kaiser Frederick!"

A tall and splendid figure, following hard upon the heels of the ancient servitor, strode into the hall. Like Hohenzollern, he was clad from head to foot in armor. His hauberk was of the finest leather, covered thickly with interlacing rings of steel gleaming with silver and gold. The close-fitting hood was drawn up around his shoulders and over his head, which was covered in addition with a round cap of burnished steel surmounted by a golden crown and topped by the double-headed eagle, which the Crusader Con-

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rad had made the badge of imperial sovereignty. Over his hauberk he wore a rich surcoat of tissue of silver with three lions-leopards of vivid scarlet, one above the other, rampant, upon his breast. From a heavy silver-plated belt hung a ponderous sword in a jeweled scabbard, the hilt richly chased and set with priceless gems. His left arm bore a triangular shield plated with steel and emblazoned like the tunic with the royal lions of the Hohenstaufens. Steel-plated gauntlets and pointed golden spurs completed his attire.

He was a ruddy, highly colored, massive man. Beneath a noble brow he surveyed the world in lordly way from out a pair of fiery steel-blue eyes — eyes with a glint of humor lurking in them behind their heat. Veiling, but not concealing, the firmness of mouth and strength of jaw, flowed a magnificent auburn beard far down his breast, whence his name. Pride, strength, ability, self-will, courage,

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generosity, and passion were all parts of his magnificent personality. Power and majesty were in his port. Here was one who would bear the ancient name of Cæsar worthily with the best, if he could but conquer his deadliest enemy—himself. The broad shoulders seemed well fitted to carry the weight of empire, the mighty arm strong to defend his imperial prerogative, the massive brow cunning to plan. Here was one who, if he could not reign, would at least die gloriously. No one who looked upon him would forget him.

He stood a moment before the door, gazing at the countess. Presently a slight smile irradiated his features, and when he smiled he was charming. He threw his shield from him, stepped forward, and bowed low before her.

“Lady Matilda, I greet thee again.”

“My liege, I bid you welcome to my castle.”

“I thank you, fair countess, for the

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hospitality which, if somewhat enforced upon you, and scanty withal, shall be not less gratefully enjoyed by me."

"Comes the emperor in peace or war to the poor house of the Vohburgs?"

"In love, your Ladyship."

"And that means both."

"Nay, not so, I trow. Let there be no question of strife between us. When last you were an inmate of our ducal court, madam, I made — proposals — which —"

"Which were an insult to any honest woman, my lord," interrupted the haughty countess, looking at him scornfully from under level brows.

Wincing under her disdain, the eye of the king sought the floor abashed. His disengaged hand played with the hilt of his sword in some embarrassment.

"There be some indifferent honest women, madam," at last he answered, somewhat hotly, it seemed, too, "who might not have thought so, perchance."

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“I belong not to that class, sire,” she replied contemptuously. “Infamy hath never even been whispered against the women of my race till you breathed it in my ear.”

“But let that pass, I beg you, lady,” returned the king, with deference and deprecation in his voice. “May I not ask its dismissal from thy mind, when, acknowledging my error, I sue for pardon?”

“Words of entreaty and appeal do not lessen the shame, my lord!”

“Not even when uttered by a king?” he cried, bending toward her.

“When a king wooes a woman he is but a man, I think,” she answered straightly. “But I forgive you, my lord, and so far as an honest German maiden can, I forget your proposition.”

“And perhaps you will let me complete my apologies, fair countess, by making what reparation I can. I come as a suppliant once more. Nay, start

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not back, but hear me. Wilt be, not mistress, but wife to empire ? ”

“ And the noble Adelheid ? ” she cried quickly.

“ The Holy Father, whom God assoil,” he interrupted promptly, making the sign of the cross piously as he spoke, “ hath pronounced the writ of severance and divorce. See, here is the writing,” he exclaimed, taking from his tunic a parchment sealed with the papal bulla.

“ And upon what pretext was this pronouncement made, my lord ? ”

“ What have kings to do with pretexts ? ” he answered sharply, annoyed by her questioning. “ Pretenses are for common men. Know, madam, that majesty doth not justify itself to subjects.”

“ But majesty itself must plead to God.”

“ I have done so through His Vicegerent,” he replied triumphantly.

“ The Pope may keep the conscience

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of the king, sire, but he will not dispose of mine," she answered haughtily; "and ere I entertain thy wooing, I must know thy reason."

"By Heaven, madam, you yourself are pretext and reason enow for me! Such beauty, such majesty of person, such keenness of mind as thou hast, are fit for nothing less than a throne."

"And you make me, your Majesty, the cause of infamy? You use me as a pretext for your violation of the marriage vow? For shame, sire!"

"But the Pope —"

"Speak not to me of Pope!" she cried. "Know, sir, that I refuse —"

"Hold!" said the king, fiercely. "'T is treason — nay, 't is blasphemy itself! I warn thee, push not my patience too far, lest that for which I have stooped to sue I take by force!"

He stepped close to her side as he spoke.

"A noble and a kingly threat," she

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answered, withdrawing from him. “Nay, come no nearer, lord. You cannot enforce my heart and honor. And whilst I have this,”—touching the dagger at her girdle,—“though I stand alone, the power of the empire cannot win my person.”

“And,” cried the king, appalled by this display of resolution, “between death and our person you choose —”

“Death, your Majesty, a thousand times !”

“By God’s wounds, you would reject me ! Me, madam ! Dost know what ’t is you do ? I shall go high. Nay, I boast not, but speak true. I feel it here. The nobles, princes, and kings who have not yet acknowledged my election shall be made to feel the weight of my arm. I shall make of this Germany an empire fit indeed for Cæsar, and not even the triple-tiara’d he of Rome shall stay my hand. Indeed, I have his promise here to lodge the Roman crown upon my head. By the mass ! this thou shalt

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share with me, side by side. We will mount together. And be assured, fair Matilda, that I seek not merely to dazzle thee with the power of a king, but I offer thee the love of a man who may not be thought unworthy a place among men, I trust. I lay at your feet the devotion and the hard-earned reputation of a soldier not unskilled in war, and even now not unknown to fame. By the rood, lady, I shall make that term of derision thou wottest of a title of honor, and any woman in the end may be proud to be the wife of Barbarossa! But I have not the cunning tongue of the gay gallants of my court. I have said my say in the blunt words of a soldier; and now — thy answer!”

“’T is no, my lord. You offer me a kingdom. Know, sire, that I already reign — and in a soldier’s heart.”

“This Hohenzollern?”

“Yes, your Majesty. The man who stood beside you with broken sword and

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shattered shield on a stricken field thou knowest of; who himself received the blow which would have clipped thy brow ere it had worn the crown. And you have put him under the ban of the empire, have declared him outlaw, commissioned all men to strike him down! For shame, my lord! But know," she cried, raising her voice, "if all the world forsake him, one woman will still cleave to him, follow him wherever he goes, share his trouble, interpose her life for his — and this because she loves him! You have said that the hot passion which surges through your veins is love for me; and though love is best shown in sacrifice, and blossoms sweetest in the white garments of purity, sire, yet you may feel, from the shadow of it that is in your heart, how I love this man."

Carried away by his passion, the monarch, in spite of this avowal of her love for his whilom vassal and rival, stepped toward her with outstretched arms, as if

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to seize by force that dazzling person for which he sued. But hurried as was his movement, it was not quick enough. Forgetful for the moment, in the suddenness of the king's approach, that she had only to call out to summon the count to her assistance, the countess sprang back from him; her ready hand seized the dagger at her waist; she whipped it from its sheath and turned the point to her heart.

As she did so, recollection of the aid at hand came back to her. She smiled faintly, and the hand that held the dagger relaxed a little. In the next second the idea flashed into her mind that, if she could simulate earnestness in the situation sufficiently well to delude the king into thinking her threat a reality, she might thereby persuade him to abandon his purpose. She was a splendid and natural actress; love inspired her; the stake she played for was great indeed. If she could win the game without the capture of the king by the count, much

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would be gained. She tried it bravely, and she did it well.

Intense resolution mingled with the love-light of her previous declaration in her eyes. Her strong hand holding the keen weapon did not tremble. She was the very picture of inflexible determination. In one quick glance Barbarossa believed that he comprehended it all. He was completely deceived by her fiery earnestness. One thrust, and she would be for no man's wooing, he thought.

"Nay, no nearer, for at a touch I plunge this dagger into mine own breast!" she cried.

He stopped, daunted before her brave determination, as she continued, exulting in her mastery of the situation and hoping that her play would win at last:

"For shame, my lord! Take back the wife of your youth. Devote yourself to your great destiny, and leave to a devoted friend and faithful servitor, and one poor woman, alone in this world, and

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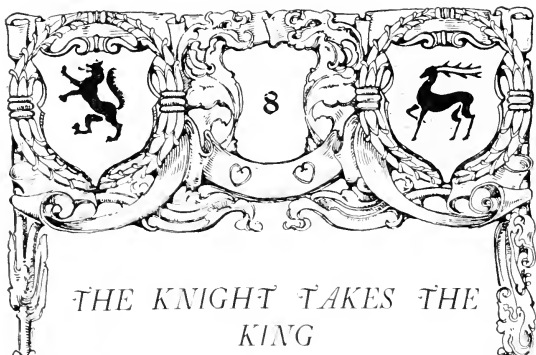
who was by her father confided to your knightly care, the freedom of their hearts!"

She had never looked so splendidly beautiful as when she made this noble plea. Almost, indeed, she moved the king to grant her petition. For a space he gazed at her, half-relenting as she confronted him.

"The man has crossed my will, flaunted my power!" cried the king, at last, having succeeded in stifling the voice of conscience called to life in his heart by her glowing words, and more than ever determined to possess her. "He shall die! And you, madam, shall yet learn what it is to thwart the empire. For the last time, wilt come with me and be my wife?"

"No."

"Then thou shalt be taken to be what I will! What, ho, without, there!" he cried. "Eckhardt, attend me! I—"



THE KNIGHT TAKES THE
KING



“**D**ID your Majesty call?” exclaimed a manly voice at the king’s elbow, as the count, sword in hand and shield on arm, entered the room.

“Hohenzollern!” cried the king, starting back in surprise, at the same time laying a hand upon his sword. “Sheathe your sword, and down, sirrah, upon your knees, and beg the mercy of the king!”

“To-night, sire, Zollern’s hill o’ertops Staufen’s mountain. I kneel not.”

“Thy knightly duty, presumptuous noble!”

THE KNIGHT TAKES THE KING

“Forgive me in that I seem to fail in knightly duty to my liege; but it appears, your Majesty, that, from this, the ties are broken between us.”

“And what may that be, sir?” asked the king, disdaining to examine the parchment which Conrad held out to him.

“Hast not seen it? ’T is the ban of thy empire, your Majesty,” replied the count, “and I treat it thus,” tearing it across the middle and throwing it at the king’s feet.

Frederick’s sword was out in a moment. Snatching up his shield, “You shall rue this insult, Sir Count!” he cried. “We did design to pardon you if by chance you were brought to us alive; but now our mercy is strained to the breaking-point. Nay, ’t is broken. We dismiss clemency —”

“And forget service?”

“By the mass! dare you remind us —”

“’T was I who did so a moment since,”

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interjected the countess; "and I beg your Majesty to sheathe your sword. Your Majesty knows not the danger you are in."

"What, ho, without, there! To me, Eckhardt — the emperor is attacked!" cried the king again, in his fury stamping his foot upon the floor.

"Your Majesty may save your breath," remarked the count, smiling insouciantly. "Baron Eckhardt is prisoner in the refectory."

"Who hold him?"

"Two of my men. He lingered long over the wine-cup, sire."

"This is too much; I will deal with thee alone," cried the king, boldly stepping forward; not without reason did he wear the regal lions upon his breast. "Stand aside, woman, lest I harm thee!" he shouted, as Matilda intervened, barring his way.

"Your Majesty," exclaimed Conrad, firmly, quick as the king's movement,



“ ‘ Did your Majesty call ? ’ ”

THE KNIGHT TAKES THE KING

“lay but a hand upon the person of the countess, and by all my knightly honors I swear that I will cut you down beneath the crown you wear! Within, here!” he cried.

In an instant the room was filled with men, who burst through the hangings in every direction.

“Treason — treason! We are betrayed!” cried the king.

“No, your Majesty; no traitor I! Since that paper yonder I am no longer servant of thine. Thou hast absolved me of my duty — there can be no treachery where there is no allegiance.”

“What would you do?”

“We play a game, my lord,—call it chess an you will,—in which the knight takes the king. So much for our present purpose. Of the future, we shall discourse upon it when the present heat of blood has cooled.”

“And you, knaves!” cried the emperor, “know ye what ye do? This

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man is under our royal ban. He is an outlaw. Every man's hand is against him."

"Not mine, my lord," interrupted old Degerberg, promptly.

"Nor mine," cried old Hans.

"Nor mine," echoed the different men.

"We are his men, sire," added Degerberg. "We were his men before we were thine, and we will be his men to the end. If he wills to devote us to death or hell, he hath only to point us the way."

Frederick glanced round the room. He was not minded to submit tamely. The fighting blood ran free in his veins. Overturning a heavy table in front of him, with quick decision he leaped to one side and stood with his back against the wall, his shield up, his sword out.

"Who will be the first to strike the Barbarossa?" he shouted proudly, as he faced the men with splendid defiance.

THE KNIGHT TAKES THE KING

If bold courage were a requisite, well had his compeers judged him worthy of the imperial purple.

“I, a woman!” instantly cried the countess, who stood nearest him, flinging herself upon the arm that held the sword. He had disregarded her proximity, as a woman, in the prospect of the fight, and was taken at a disadvantage. She clung to him with lioness-like strength; but as he strove to throw her off, Conrad and Degerberg were on him in a second. The latter pinioned him with his mighty arms, while Hohenzollern wrested the sword from his hand. Matilda drew back as the rest of the soldiers, with lifted axes and swords, crowded about them.

“Doth your Majesty yield?” cried the count.

“My faith,” said the king, smiling carelessly, as wise as he was valiant, “’t were folly to do otherwise in the face of this. ’T was a woman who betrayed

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Samson, and I count it no disgrace in this instance to cry for quarter. Many of ye had bit the dust, were the circumstances other than they are, ere that sword had been wrested from my hand. Now that you have me, what seek you ? What ransom ? ”

“ Of that, anon, sir,” answered Conrad. “ Meanwhile, as I fear your Majesty’s absence from the camp will be noticed, and troops in greater number than these brave soldiers of mine be despatched hither, we will seek a safer haven than this castle. Will your Majesty go bound, or may I have your parole not to escape ? ”

“ Thou hast my word, Sir Count ; and when I give my word I do not break it, as thou knowest — even when it is written beneath a ban,” he added meaningly.

“ Aye, that I do know, your Majesty, and for that reason do I take the king. Thou shalt go with us and be treated with all respect. Let a man but lay a hand upon thee, and I myself will strike

THE KNIGHT TAKES THE KING

him down. Degerberg, see that the horses are prepared. Bring forth the king's charger as well, and see that a palfrey in the stable be made ready for the countess. We ride to the Black Forest to-night. Hasten! Go thou with the captain, my liege; we follow presently."

Upon the word the little party, led by old Degerberg, the king in the center, weaponless and closely guarded, marched through the hall and into the courtyard, where the horses were speedily brought forth. Conrad and Matilda were left alone once more.

"We have cast the die this time, surely," said the count.

"Yes," assented Matilda. "Our heads are forfeit now."

"My situation is not altered greatly thereby, for my head was forfeit before; but thine, lady? I was wrong to have involved thee in this trouble!" he murmured reproachfully.

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“I did involve myself, sir,” answered Matilda, promptly. “Bethink you, ’t was I who caught the sword of the king.”

She crept closer to him as she spoke.

“Yes, and without you we had fared ill, taking him. He was a soldier of proved courage before he was a king, and he would not have submitted tamely. Blood had been spilt had it not been for your action; yet I could scarcely call thee a peacemaker, fair Matilda.”

“Call me what thou wilt,” she returned, passionately taking him in her arms, “so that I am thine. I am glad I raised a hand against the king. We are both together now — in life or death, together.”

“It bids fair for death, sweet love,” he answered, gazing at her fondly. “But howe’er it be, ’t is together. But go you to your chamber now and make you ready for the journey. We ride hard and we ride far. By morning we must

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be well within the forest. Perchance we may not see this place again. Canst stand the journey of the night? Aye, it may be for many nights."

"I am a soldier's daughter," she answered bravely. "I laugh at hardships — with you."

"Shalt not take a woman to bear thee company, lady?"

"Nay, 't would be but an added trouble; besides, there 's none here save Gertrude."

"And she?"

"An old woman, my nurse and foster-mother, asleep at this hour in the other tower. Pray I that she may sleep on. She is weak and feeble — I 'll go with thee alone; thou shalt protect me, thou art my all."

"With my soul, lady mine."

"And I trust thee, as I love thee. But time flies. Our purpose waits —"

"Aye, we must hasten; the army of the king lies but two leagues from here."

HOHENZOLLERN

They may be even now upon the march hither. Great men are missed. Should he not return or send word by morning, he would be sought for, and all would be discovered. And another danger lurks: the Lion of Saxony, your other suitor, is encamped on the confines of the forest, a few miles in the other direction, with a formidable force."

"You would not deliver the king to him, Conrad?"

"Never! He is my king; I may take him myself, but no other shall lay hand upon him when I am by."

"What mean you, then?"

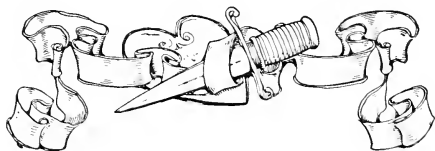
"This: The presence of Duke Henry of Saxony constitutes a second peril. He hath not acknowledged the emperor; in fact, he is the head of the nobles who refused to ratify and confirm the election, who would fain subvert the empire. Did he hear of our adventure he would pounce upon the king instantly. Welf hath no love for Waiblinger, and the

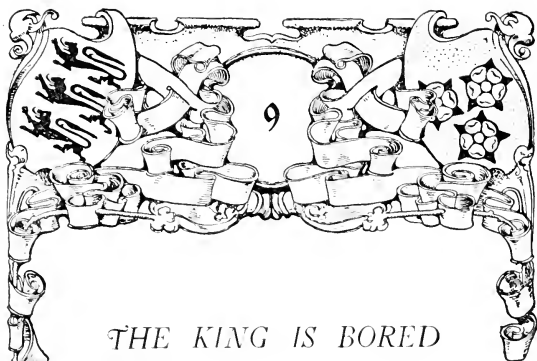
THE KNIGHT TAKES THE KING

silver circlet, the iron crown, and the imperial purple would thus become the appanage of the Saxon. That were a misfortune for our land, indeed. I prefer the royal Barbarossa."

"E'en under his ban?"

"Aye, though I be under his ban, lady," replied this young Warwick. "He cannot by any parchment proclamation deprive me of my German birthright or my love of country. But delay no longer. Make haste for the journey. I shall meet thee in the courtyard."





THE KING IS BORED



ORCHES borne by a few frightened lackeys, who had been called from their hiding-places by Degerberg's men, threw an uncertain light over the wet walls and stones of the bailey. The horses had been saddled, and, held by their masters, were eagerly clinking and pawing on the pavement. The rain had ceased, and the moonlight was shining fitfully through the rifted clouds driven fiercely across the sky by the rising wind. Old Degerberg, ax in hand, stood by the king. The emperor, looking every

THE KING IS BORED

inch a monarch, realizing the futility of resistance, had remained quietly watching the busy preparations of the men.

As Hohenzollern appeared, a soldier led forward the king's charger and the war-horse of the count. From the saddle-bow on each animal hung the heavy cross-barred, square-topped helmet of the day, designed to be worn over the hooded hauberk. As both the king and the count had drawn the metal cap and hood of their hauberks over their heads, neither gentleman thought it necessary to assume his helmet. Bidding the house-steward, who had not left with the rest of the servants, to look after the castle, and directing him to keep Baron Eckhardt in close ward as long as he could, the count turned to greet the countess, who made her appearance in the doorway.

She was wrapped from head to foot in a long cloak of blue cloth, fur-trimmed, with the hood, which she had not drawn over her head, falling back upon her

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shoulders. She wore a low, flat cap of blue laced with silver, with the red wolf fastening a heron plume floating from it; her hands were covered by gloves of delicately tanned leather.

Having first removed the king's battle-ax from the saddle-bow, and having assisted him to mount by holding the stirrup, Hohenzollern turned to the countess. Though she was a woman of splendid proportions, he lifted her from the ground with ease and placed her upon the saddle of the palfrey which had been prepared for her, taking opportunity at the same time to press a kiss upon the soft leather boot which covered the shapely foot she thrust into the stirrup. Then he turned to his own horse, and albeit he was clad in full armor, leaped from the ground into the saddle without difficulty. A few hasty arrangements were made, the ranks ordered, directions were given, and then the cavalcade started forth through the gateway in the castle wall.

THE KING IS BORED

Conrad and Matilda led the way. After them came six men-at-arms, then the king, attended by old Degerberg, who seemed like his watchful shadow. On each side of these two were three more men-at-arms, while the remainder of the band, including several spare animals laden with supplies, brought up the rear. As they filed out of the gate, Degerberg took in the little army in swift survey. One was missing. Which one? He looked again, rapidly scanning each figure illumined by the light cast from two huge blazing cressets suspended over the gateway of the castle. Then he called out loudly to the count riding a few paces ahead:

“Your Lordship, we are not all here!”

The count reined in his steed instantly.

“Who is missing?” he cried.

“The Italian, sir.”

“I suspected him, you remember,” said Matilda, promptly, woman-like.

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“Know ye aught of him, any of ye, men?” Hohenzollern asked, facing his little army.

“Your Lordship, he did say,” answered one of the men, hesitatingly, “while we were waiting in the hall, that we could drive a good bargain with Duke Henry of Saxony for the emperor.”

“The foul dog!” exclaimed the count, hotly.

“’T would be a noble ending to an act of treachery, Sir Count,” said the king, softly, “and would remove thee from our ban, which never hung heavier over thy head than at this moment.”

“Will your Majesty give me leave?” answered Hohenzollern, disdaining a reply to the innuendo. “What answer made you?” he asked, turning toward the man.

“That we were your Lordship’s men and the emperor was your prisoner.”

“Good! And what became of him after that?”

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“I can tell, may it please your Lordship,” answered old Heinrich, who had stood in the gateway to watch the party go forth. “He came down perhaps half an hour before the rest of ye, and took horse and rode away, saying, when I questioned him, that you had despatched him upon an important errand.”

“Ha!” remarked the count, sternly. “Which way did he turn when he crossed the drawbridge?”

“To the west, sir.”

“And what sought he in that direction?”

“Henry the Lion’s power lies yonder,” answered old Degerberg, pointing west. “So I learned this morning.”

“Is ’t so. Rode he rapidly, Sir Steward? Did he appear pressed for time?”

“He went at the full speed of his horse, my lord.”

“This looks ill, countess, for our plans; but the greater need to press on, then,” cried the count. “Forward, the array.”

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An instant after, the trampling hoofs of the foremost horseman struck the drawbridge over the moat. During this colloquy Hohenzollern and the Countess Matilda had turned back to the gate from the head of the line, and now rode last. The road separated as it left the drawbridge. One road led east, another west, a third plunged straight to the south through the blackness of the gloomy forest which stretched leagues away in every direction.

“Turn we to the east or to the west, my lord?” called out old Hans, the leading soldier.

There seemed to be a momentary hesitation before the reply came. The heart of the king stood still for a second. Henry the Lion, he knew, would give anything to get possession of his person, and then good-by to empire and all his dreams.

“To the south,” said the count, briefly; and in that decision he laid up in the

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king's mind treasure for himself against future need.

But the emperor said nothing; nay, as Hohenzollern rode along the line to regain his place, he even stopped him.

"You lose a chance, my lord count," he said. "Know you not that the Lion of Saxony would pay well for my head? Why not carry thy treachery to its natural end, sir, and have done?"

"My liege, I am no traitor. I do not take thee prisoner to do thee harm. Perish that thought! I fight only for two things men have ever cherished — life and love. Grant but these, and I am your Majesty's loyal servant as before."

"And you have jeopardized your knightly honor by striking against your king."

"One word, sire, and you are free."

"While the king 's a prisoner, he speaks no word."

"And doth the king speak of honor?" interrupted the countess, bitterly and with

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meaning. "Doth the king forget the charge my father the count laid upon his honor when he gave me into his wardship?"

"A heavy charge indeed, lady, and a dangerous one for any man, be he king or commoner. I fail to see in what way I am faulted. I did indeed say — but I conceive that I have atoned in knightly fashion in offering you my hand."

"You put the man I love under your ban, and for no reason but that I loved him, and he me," replied the countess, quickly. "Was that knightly done, my sire?"

"And your Majesty assails my honor," broke in Hohenzollern, fiercely. "I am a masterless man by the writing and seal on yonder torn parchment in the hall, and I owe allegiance nowhere — unless it be here," turning to the countess. "If your Majesty but —"

"Peace, Sir Count!" said the emperor, overwhelmed by these attacks. "Do

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you intend to punish as well as prison me, by forcing me to listen to your arguments? Ride to the head of your column and leave me alone with the silent, faithful Degerberg."

He smiled bitterly at his own sarcastic words.

"Your Majesty speaks like an emperor and not a prisoner."

"Sir, I am an emperor! While the king lives he wears the crown. Rash men may hold the hand that sways the scepter, but — it is the king's hand still."

They were deep in the forest by this time, and as they moved along the dark road, illumined here and there by little patches of moonlight shining down through the black arches of the giant trees, at the suggestion of Degerberg the count sent old Hans and another man far ahead along the road, and extended two more on each side, lest he should be taken by surprise. The little party drew close together, and each man bared his

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weapon. To the right of them lay the army of the Duke of Saxony, Henry the Lion; to the left and farther away, that of the emperor: their only course was to plunge boldly between the two camps, and endeavor to get so far into the forest by the morning that the possibility of catching them, when their adventure was discovered, would be faint indeed.

They could, of course, wander off the road into the trackless depths of the forest at any time, but as they were yet so near to its border, they would thereupon inevitably be found and captured without difficulty by any pursuers. They could make faster progress by keeping to the main road, and when they gained sufficient distance they could then seek concealment in the very heart of the ancient wood. They trotted forward rapidly, therefore, and each moment, as they supposed, drew farther from the place of peril.

For the most part they rode in silence.

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The men said nothing; the emperor was equally reticent, and, save for a whispered word or two from time to time between the count and Matilda, the only sound that broke the silence was the patter of the horses' feet upon the ground and the perpetual clinking of the armor. They had been riding for a mile or so when the rapid gallop of another horse, coming down the road toward them at such a speed that he made a greater noise than their own group, apprised them of the advent of a man. Hohenzollern rode to the front, sword in hand, bidding the others to halt in the shadow and remain on guard. The man approaching proved to be one of his own band.

"My lord," he said softly, "we have taken a foot-soldier who burst upon us through the trees yonder. He says he bears tidings for your Lordship."

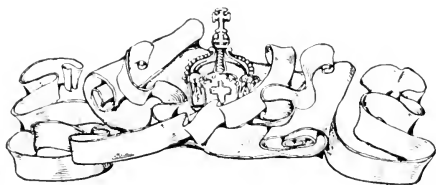
"Where is he?"

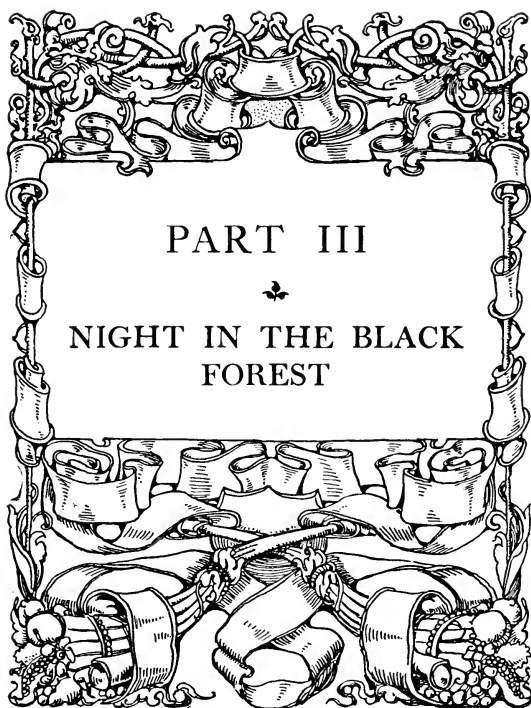
"The sergeant Hans brings him along. I galloped back to warn your Lordship."

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“’T is well. Let us turn to meet him.”

A few rods farther they came upon old Hans on horseback, with another soldier walking nonchalantly by his side. They were in a little open glade, and the moonlight made the place like day.

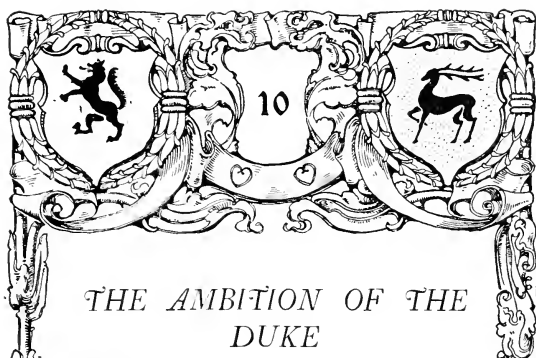




PART III



NIGHT IN THE BLACK
FOREST



THE AMBITION OF THE DUKE



IN a pleasant meadow hard by the Black Forest, and only a few miles from Vohburg, the soldiers of the Duke of Saxony lay encamped about the gorgeous pavilion of their master. They had reached their resting-places after a long, hard, all-day march, and they were correspondingly weary.

Although it was yet somewhat early in the evening, the nobles and knights had retired to their tents to get as much sleep as possible before they were called to arms, for it was rumored that the duke

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had set the march for an unusually early hour in the morning. Their esquires and pages had performed those body services which the custom of the time made necessary, and were themselves reposing in such positions as their stations required, where experience had taught them that they could best keep guard over their masters and be at hand in any sudden emergency.

The hardy men-at-arms, and especially the foot-soldiery and the followers of the camp, equally worn out, disposed themselves to rest where they could, unsheltered by any tent from the chill of the night air; those who possessed them covered themselves with their horse-blankets, using their saddles for pillows, while others found a partial protection under their superimposed shields; but most of the common men, without protection or other covering than the clothing they wore, lay crowded around the smoldering fires of the camp.

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Off to one side, the high-mettled chargers of the knights were tethered, next to them the stout horses of the men-at-arms, and farther away the pack-animals of the army were picketed. The whole encampment was surrounded by watchful guards, pacing to and fro, with weapons ready at hand. They were in the enemy's country, and it behooved them to keep faithful and vigilant ward.

In the tent of the duke, easily distinguished by its size and the drooping banner above it, which, if the light had permitted, could have been seen to bear an emblazonry of the roses of Saxony, a light was still burning. Before the entrance a stout man-at-arms in full war-gear stood leaning upon a huge unsheathed sword the blade of which sparkled in the light cast by the flames of the fire in front of the tent.

Within the canvas walls the most powerful prince in Germany paced uneasily up and down its narrow confines.

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The rather feeble and flickering light from a metal lamp,— spoil of some far-Eastern foray, or purchased from some Hebrew trader,— which hung from the ridge-pole of the tent, fell upon a young man about twenty-three years of age. He was very blond of hair and blue of eye, ruddy-cheeked, proud, royal in his bearing, a man of splendid physique, whose perfect proportions were revealed by the undress he wore, for he had laid aside his heavy armor in preparation for the night. His robe of gray was breasted with the same roses which were embroidered on his flag and which were painted on the polished surface of the shield leaning against his armor piled upon a chair. Upon a table lay his war-helmet and sword. A rude cot covered with skins and blankets completed the furniture of his pavilion.

The prince was alone in the tent. He had dismissed his gentlemen from the curtained apartments communicating with

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his own, for he did not desire either the eye or the ear of friend or servitor upon him in these meditations in which he would endeavor to determine upon a course of action suited to that crisis in his fortunes which rose before him. As he walked to and fro he thought deeply, and sometimes he spoke softly to himself, suiting action to word—a dangerous habit which years and experience would teach him to avoid. Disjointed thought and broken speech, commingled, are here set down, connected in the telling.

“Curses on him,” he murmured, “that he should have all and I nothing! German King that is, and, unless it be speedily prevented, Emperor and Roman Cæsar that shall be. And why? Is he better born than I? Hath he a stronger arm than this?” he continued, lifting his clenched hand and shaking it in the air. “Is he younger, handsomer, braver, better bred? Hath he more wit, higher courage, stouter heart? Is Swabia entitled

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by any right divine to take precedence of Saxony? Can his head plan more wisely than mine? Are his hands stronger to guide the empire than these?"

He stopped and struck a hand upon the table impatiently and angrily. After a little silence he continued:

"Shall I submit to the cowardice of a fool, to the trickery of a knave which gave him the deciding vote over me when the free and sovereign electors were met in Diet at Frankfort six months ago to find a lodgment for the crown of empire? Doth the word of one man,—wretched weakling, traitor; crafty, scheming churchman,—repairing to that election pledged a thousand times to me, make this very man a god, put him on a pinnacle to dazzle the world, whilst I remain his 'dear cousin of Saxony,' his 'most loyal vassal,' his 'young and trusted' — pah!

"Yet—yet—the law we have struggled to make, and hold for our own, the

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privilege, nay, the right, as free princes of the empire, of electing here in our beloved Germany who shall rule over us! My father fought for it, died for it; and shall I, his son, be the first to break it? The law! Ah, but the empire! 'T is a dazzling stake. Shall I lose the crown, and not even gain mine ancient duchy of Bavaria? Shall he win all and I nothing?

“It hath been borne to me these past months that there is whisper of a granted divorce in the air of the court at Waiblingen. I wot well whither that tendeth. I trow toward the fair Matilda, without doubt. Shall he enjoy the wife, too, that I fain would have? When I bade her to my duchy to wear the coronet by my side, she looked me full in the eyes from under her level brows and, with a blunt word of thanks, said, ‘No!’ By the mass! I turned as red as mine own roses to be so flouted—and by a woman!”

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He laughed bitterly at the thought, and then his quick mind took up the train again :

“T is true this Swabian duke fared scarce better than I, but then he offered her the dubious position of a mistress. She spurned it royally. Aye, but what will her answer be if he is free and approaches her with an imperial crown in his hand instead of the paltry bauble of a duchess? They say she loves that soldier of fortune Hohenzollern! He who seized the rose in the castle hall that day. Loves him! By the mass! I think ’t is true. I did mark the heave of her bosom, the color that came and went in her cheek, the light in her eyes, when she looked on him, seeing naught of my observance; another rival—but he ’s easily disposed of. There be a dozen men-at-arms who can cut him down. But will she keep to him in the face of the crown? Nay; the king only is to be feared.

“A proved soldier, too, and I, they

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say, a boy! Well, 't is but another cause whereby I hate him. First in war — and love! Beshrew me! Love is for the peasant; ambition is the god that sits beneath my helm. Yet the Lady Matilda is passing fair. She is alone in the world, her dower great. There is no such maiden in all Germany. I would she were mine. A wife were something sweet, they say. Shall he have her as well? There 's the count — aye; but can she resist the imperial diadem? How if I should proffer it?

“Lion of Saxony, thou art a fool, a craven, if thou dost permit him to go unchallenged. But what to do? Aye, that 's the question. Curses on my dull brain! I can think of naught but to move against him with my power and put the issue to the hazard of the field; and any fool might contrive a better plan, meseems. But what else to do I know not. So I 'll strike. 'T is not the first time the sword has won the world.

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“ Beyond Vohburg the emperor’s party lies, in numbers equal to my own. We march at daybreak ; and if, as I do believe, he doth the same, we ’ll meet at the castle, and there will be merry jousting and bloody play ’neath the fair Matilda’s windows. Stop ; I would better send a party to secure her tower. ’T is but lightly held, they say. Her men are with the Swabian. Holding it, I have a refuge ; ’t is a point gained if—I fear no man, but — perchance I should fail ! Fail ! Then vanish riches, vanish dreams of empire, vanish power, vanish love ! Yet, before that hap, I swear my roses will be reddened with another hue, and the lions-leopards shall not come off scatheless !

“ I would that there were some other way, though, that I could catch this emperor on the wing ! Holding him, the rest were easy. If I wring not an abdication from him, force him to do my will, when I have him in my hand—

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why, there are daggers in Saxony, and all of them are mine.”

He paused long at this moment, and thought deeply, a flush of shame rising in his cheek in spite of himself at his un-knightly proposition.

“Shame on thee, **Henry**, shame!” he murmured. “Strike thy foe openly in the field an thou wilt. Nay, I ’ll do no murder. Yet I would that I might seize him. He should not ’scape me. And that traitorous bishop whose vote lost me the election! He shall have business elsewhere when we meet again—in hell, for aught I care. I ’ll see to it. Oh, ambition, thou art my god! And one man stands in my way. The Redbeard I find where’er I turn. ’T is dangerous to bar the path of the Saxon Lion. Well, now to seize the tower! Without, there, the guard!” he called sharply.

The hangings parted instantly—so quickly, in fact, that a man less preoccupied than young **Henry** would have sus-

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pected too near an ear, too close a watch, over his person.

“Ha, Sergeant Dietrick, is it thou?” exclaimed the duke, as the soldier stopped before him and saluted. “Send us hither the captain of our guard.”

The soldier saluted again, and turned on his heel and stepped out of the tent. Before he had gone two steps the under-officer in charge of the sentries approached him. He was followed by two archers, who held between them another man indistinguishable in the darkness.

“Whom have ye here?” cried the sergeant, promptly barring the way with his sword. “Stand fast where ye be.”

“The officer of the guard,” responded the other, “bringing a man who would fain see the duke — a prisoner. He approached the lines a moment since, halted when challenged, and declared that he came upon an errand vital to the happiness of our lord.”

“The duke sees no wandering stranger

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now; no vagabond soldiers get access to him at this hour of the night. Keep him in ward until the morning."

"Nay, brave sir," interrupted the prisoner, eagerly, the harsh German softened by accents which told of nurture under the sunny skies of Italy. "Say you not so, I beg of you! My business is most pressing; 't will not wait till morning. Bar me at your peril, gentle esquires; I must see his Highness. 'T is life and death — and more."

"I care not," answered Dietrick. "I have strict orders to permit no one to enter, on pain of death, and even now you let me from my pressing errand. Take him away. The duke may see him in the morning an it be his pleasure."

The officer nodded to his man and turned away. The Italian, however, lifted up his voice until it rang through the camp.

"I must see the duke," he called out. "I come from Vohburg."

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“What is the meaning of this unseemly brawling at dead of night in our camp?” cried Henry, coming out of his tent, attracted by that last word.

“Your Royal Highness,” cried the Italian, “an audience, I beseech! I have news of importance! I crave speech with thee!”

“This is no time for an audience. You heard our orders. We will hear thee in the morning. Take him away.”

“But Vohburg, my lord — I come from Vohburg!”

There might be something in this, flashed into the mind of the young noble. He would hear this man further. It were best to neglect no point in the game.

“Ha, say you so?” he asked at last.

“Aye, my good lord; and what I have to tell thee cannot wait till morning.”

The duke hesitated and looked keenly at the man.

“What cognizance is this on thy breast?”

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“’T is the stag of Hohenzollern, sir.”

“The servant of Barbarossa?”

“And the lover of the Lady Matilda, sir.”

“Came you from him, sirrah? Hath he the rare effrontery to send an embassy to us?”

“In despite of him, sir, I come. I beseech you to hear me! There is more in this than you dream. An empire —” he whispered, stepping nearer the duke.

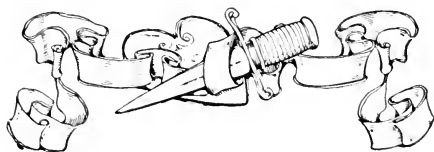
“Disarm him, officer,” said the duke, after reflecting a moment, as his curiosity got the better of him, “and send him within the tent. You, Dietrick, say naught to the captain of our guard for the present. Stay here and keep close watch. Who ’s this approaching?” he added as another soldier came up and saluted with his halberd.

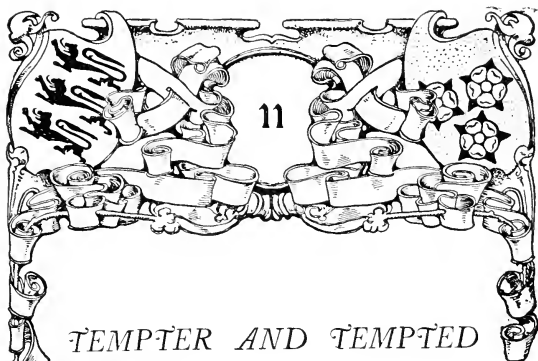
“I relieve the guard, your Highness. ’T is the hour,” answered the approaching soldier.

“’T is well. Do you stand ten paces

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in front of the tent, and permit no one to approach it nearer, under pain of death. You, Dietrick, will serve us yet a little longer before you go to rest. Take post in the rear of the tent the same distance away. We would have speech with this man alone. Alone, I say. Therefore, mark ye that none o'erhears us. Follow me, sirrah," he said to the Italian, whose weapons meanwhile had been taken from him by the guards. "The rest of you back to your posts, and keep good watch."





THE two men-at-arms assumed their designated positions, Henry and the prisoner entered the tent.

"Thou art an Italian, I take it from thy accent," said the duke, sitting on a stool by the table upon which his sword lay, while the other, in obedience to a gesture, remained standing respectfully before him.

"Yes, your Highness."

"And thy name?"

"Ser Giovanni di Firenze, messire."

"And you serve the Hohenzollern by that cognizance on your breast?"

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“Not now, your Highness.”

“Who then?”

“I am masterless to-night; to-morrow I trust to wear the roses of Saxony — and follow an emperor.”

The duke started violently.

“Saxony hath no need to enlist under his banner every seeking wanderer that comes across his path, sirrah,” he said disdainfully.

“Still I venture to hope that an exception may be made for me, my lord.”

“And that other word — here is no place to follow an emperor. I care not who knoweth it, but service with me will not bring thee into the train of Frederick of Hohenstaufen.”

“Had I sought that, my lord, I should have turned to the east when I ’scaped over the drawbridge at Vohburg.”

“What mean you?”

“I — my lord, ’t is a strange tale, and I — ”

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“Be brief, man! We have but little time to waste.”

“My lord, at Vohburg dwells the Countess Matilda alone.”

“Thy news is old.”

“Aye, my lord, but not this: to-night came there Count Hohenzollern and his band, I in his following.”

“Well, what of it?”

“His Majesty the emperor hath put him under the ban of the empire, sir.”

“And one good deed for the Barbarossa, too.”

“And the young count, being desperate in fortune and crossed in love, hath conceived a cunning plan. The emperor comes to Vohburg to-night.”

“Comes he with force to seize the castle?”

“Nay, sir; alone, to play at making love, and perchance to seize the fair Matilda as well.”

“A fool, a double fool, to hazard so much — all, and for a woman! What

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woman that the sun shines on — or the rain rains on, for that matter — is worthy of the risk ? ”

“ True, my lord. None, as I think it, but — ”

“ I divine thy thought, knave,” interrupted the duke ; “ thou wouldst have me march thither.”

“ If you did that, Sir Duke, you would find the cage empty and the birds flown.”

“ How is that, Sir Plotter ? ”

“ Count Hohenzollern takes the emperor by force — ”

“ ’T is treason ! ”

“ Dost thou find that a harsh word, my lord ? ”

“ Proceed with thy story and question me no further,” replied the duke, flushing with anger at this shrewd interruption.

“ With the Countess Matilda by his side, they ride far to-night, seeking an asylum in — ”

The Italian stopped suddenly.

“ And thou wouldst have me march



“ ‘T is treason! ’

‘ Dost thou find that a harsh word, my lord ? ’ ”

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against the emperor's force, which, leaderless, I may the more easily master; and then?"

"Saving your grace," answered the Italian, smiling disdainfully in the dim light, "canst think of no better plan than that? The emperor——"

"Ha!" cried the duke, as the idea came to him, "we will intercept them! Whither go they? What force hath the count with him? Quick, thy answer!"

"First, lord, my reward."

"First tell me why thou hast done this."

"I would fain follow a man who is neither a fool nor an outlaw, messire. Though a soldier of Italy, I am a philosopher, too. The fortune of the Hohenzollern is unmade forever, being under the ban of the empire, and having struck against his king; and I think, if what men say of thee be true, that the crown to-night slips from Barbarossa's head. It

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hurts my pride to serve one of inferior worth, sir. On the horizon of Germany I see but one man who hath the wit and power to be its master. And the Countess Matilda is too fair and noble to wed with any but the best. I would fain wear the roses of the Saxon, my lord," replied the Italian, bowing gracefully before the young prince while thus adroitly playing upon his weaknesses.

"Is that all?"

"Nay, messire."

"What more?"

"The poor followers of Count Hohenzollern are but ill provided, although he hath a lavish hand. I would fain have the wardship of some snug little castle which I may hold for your Highness."

"Hast done?"

"And the belt of a knight, so it please your princely grace."

"Ha! Art nobly born?"

"I think so, sir, if I may believe the tales of my lady mother, although my

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father's name be held from me," replied the man, unabashed at the confession, and indeed laughing mockingly in a way which irritated the duke extremely.

"By the mass, thou traitorous dog!" cried Henry, turning to the man in sudden fury, the culmination of much repression, "there is base blood in thee somewhere, else thou wouldst neither abandon thy master in his adversity nor betray thy lawful monarch in his peril. Seekest thou reward, thou impudent dog? I spare thy life —"

"And does the Lion of Saxony so lightly renounce his ambition? Hath he, too, not sworn allegiance, nay, was he not one of the very body to elect the Duke of Swabia to the throne, and all under the law? I swear our cases differ little, sir, and your Lordship hath mistaken the note of baseness," replied Giovanni, boldly; and then, changing his tactics, he continued: "There is not a soldier in the land doth not say thou

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shouldst have been the emperor. Raise the standard when thou hast possession of Frederick, and —”

“’T is treason, slave !”

“What ’s treason, sir ? A word, a trifle — unless it spell a failure.”

“I — I will seize him for the good of the state — if I do it,” said the duke, weakly.

“Precisely, messire ; and I give you opportunity — for the good of the state.”

“A truce to this wordy babbling ! Where have they ta’en him ? Where is he now to be found ?”

“Your Lordship will know — when I have your Lordship’s promise of my reward.”

“Darest thou beard me, base-born ?” cried the duke, seizing his sword from the table and rising suddenly.

“My secret perisheth with me,” answered Ser Giovanni, quailing inwardly from the menacing point at his throat, but preserving, nevertheless, a bold front.

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“And if thy blade take my life, sir, then my tidings be gone, and I believe there is no cunning in Saxony that can entice the story once it ’scapes that way.”

The duke hesitated, but he was plainly helpless. Gnashing his teeth in rage at his futile position, he threw down the sword.

“Have thy way!” he cried furiously. “The manor of Wiltenstein shall be thine; six thousand pieces of gold shall be paid thee by my treasurer; and I will cause thee to be made a knight when we have captured Barbarossa. Now where is he? See that you serve me well, or you shall find that I can punish as heavily as I can reward generously.”

“I realize your generosity, indeed, from your kindly deed and gracious speech, sir; and your Highness pledges these gifts upon your princely word.”

“Upon my word, by my ducal coronet. Art satisfied?”

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“I am, and — I salute thee, king and emperor — aye, Cæsar that is to be!” cried the Italian, falling on his knee and kissing the Saxon’s hand.

Henry frowned darkly, and almost immediately withdrew his hand; it was evident that his association with this subtle scoundrel was not pleasant, though the gross flattery of his fellow-traitor greatly soothed his soul, in which the really good instincts of the man had been fighting against the proposed treachery. However, having settled the question of his action, he endeavored to dismiss scruples from his mind as he asked:

“Now, thy tidings. Whither do they ride?”

“Into the Black Forest, my lord.”

“In what direction?”

“To the southward, by the old road.”

“What force?”

“The Count Hohenzollern, Degerberg, his esquire and captain, some twenty

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stout men-at-arms, the king, and the Countess Matilda."

"Where may they best be intercepted?"

"Sir, if you move at once, at the Witch's Dale; but there's no time to be lost."

"Without, there!" called Henry, promptly realizing the need of haste. "Send Count Eginhard to me! Bid our esquires and gentlemen attend us immediately! Call hither the captain of our guard! Gentlemen," he said, as the various officials, scarcely stopping to dress in the urgency of their summons, burst into the tent, "arm yourselves for battle. Count Eginhard, I turn the camp over to you. At four o'clock in the morning put the men in array and start the vaward for Vohburg. We'll meet thee there. Let all be armed and ready for battle. Captain von Gluymer, summon one hundred and fifty of the very boldest riders and hardest fighters

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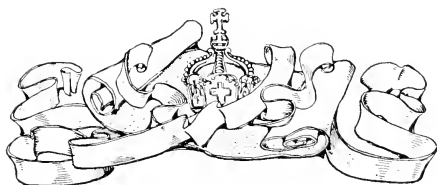
among your company to attend our person immediately! See they be full armed, too. Gentlemen," he continued, turning to his esquires, "arm me with haste. We ride into the Black Forest to-night for an empire and perchance for a wife. Thou comest, too, Ser Giovanni; therefore arm thyself. Soldiers, see that he escape not, on thy life!"

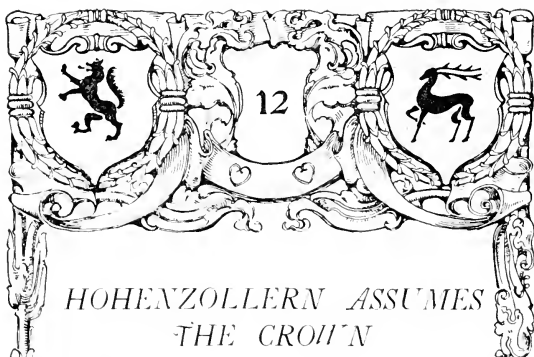
In obedience to the duke's commands, the officers hastened to fulfil the various directions that had been laid upon them. In the confusion attendant upon the sudden call to arms, no one noticed Dietrick crawling away in the darkness. While he had been supposed to be on guard at the rear of the tent, he had passed his watch, lying on the earth with his face close to the canvas, listening with all his ears.

He was able to secure a horse, taking care that it was a good one, and slipping by the sentries unnoticed, galloped at the top of his speed down the road

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that led through the forest. He had a good long start over the duke's party, having no preparations to make, and he raced madly along in the darkness like one possessed, sparing neither self nor steed.





*HOHENZOLLERN ASSUMES
THE CROWN*



HIS is the lord count," said Hans, gravely, as Hohenzollern and his man rode up to them. "You may speak."
"Art thou Count von Hohenzollern, lord?" cried the foot-soldier.

"I am. What would you have?"

"My lord, I come from the army of Henry the Lion."

"A Saxon, then?"

"Nay, sir; a Swabian," replied the man, proudly, "forced to serve in the Saxon's ranks. I was on guard at the

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king's tent this evening. There came to him a black-visaged man bearing your badge upon his coat. I could not but overhear; indeed, I listened. He said that you were under the ban of the empire."

"T is true," answered the count.
"What then?"

"That you were a desperate man and intended to seize the emperor at the Castle Vohburg to-night; that you were to ride south into the Black Forest with the emperor and the Countess Matilda; that Henry the Lion could easily capture you both to-night; that you should be killed and the emperor held prisoner. They could ride down the cross-road that intercepted this road at the Witch's Dale; behind the rocks they could ambush you. As they spoke the guard was relieved; I was free. I took a horse, the best I could find in camp, and slipped away. He fell dead from hard riding yonder, and then I met these men. I

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have ridden swift to catch you, that you might not be taken unawares."

"Why did you this?" asked the count.

"I am a Swabian, your Lordship. I love the Hohenstaufen. He is my duke, my king, and my kaiser."

"And my prisoner," said the count.

"That 's as may be, sir," ejaculated the soldier. "Intend you harm to the king?" he questioned.

"Nay, not so, as God 's my witness!" fervently replied the count. "But why ask you?"

"I had killed you where you stand," exclaimed the man, dauntlessly, "had your answer been other than it is."

"By the mass, soldier!" laughed the count, "I like thy courage. Thy name?"

"Dietrick, Sir Count."

"Wilt join my band?"

"Not while the king lives, my lord, and you are outlaw; but I will go with you to the king—save him if I can, avenge him if I may."

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“And as the king goes with me —”

“I needs must go with you also,” said the man, easily.

“But I charge you, tell not the emperor of this peril,” replied the count, “until I give you leave. Nay, thou shalt see all I do. The king’s safety before all. Dost hear?”

“I hear, and shall obey, my lord.”

“That ’s well. Let us return, then, with the news.”

The count and the three soldiers soon joined the band. The Swabian instantly made his way toward the stirrup of the emperor. When the men would have interfered, Hohenzollern sharply bade them let him alone.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “hath here a faithful servitor, and, as I happen to know, a bold one. He had nearly carried out the ban on me a moment since on the road, but for my assurance that your Majesty was in no present danger, and perhaps a native shrewdness of judg-

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ment that should harm come to me your Majesty would inevitably suffer."

"I value a faithful and a loyal heart, even though it beat in the breast of a humble soldier. A man of low degree may set an example to the head that wears the coronet. By your leave, Sir Count, I would have speech with this man — this solitary friend."

"Freely, your Majesty. Lady Matilda, Degerberg, pray attend me. Hans, and all, keep watchful guard over your prisoner."

The count, the lady, and the esquire cantered up the road a short distance until they were out of ear-shot of the men. They stopped by the wayside in the dark shadow of the trees, where none could see them.

"What danger bodes now, Conrad?" questioned the countess, anxiously.

"Alas! lady, one we cannot counter."

"That soldier with the king? This sudden stoppage? What means it?"

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The count hesitated, unwilling to break the news which meant the abandonment of their dream, the shattering of their hope.

“Conrad,” continued Matilda, urging her horse close to him and laying her hand beseechingly upon his arm, “I am fearful with apprehension. We are not to be parted?”

“Speak, my lord!” cried old Degerberg. “If there be a new danger, let us help thee meet it.”

“My heart’s life,” said Conrad, desperately, “that Italian —”

“I said I liked him not, you do recall,” interrupted the lady, rubbing the back of her hand through her gauntlet, as if to erase a hateful salutation. “The loathsome traitor!”

“Thou art right, lady. He hath betrayed us.”

“Would God I could get him within reach of my ax,” hissed Degerberg, clutching his weapon fiercely. “Speak on, young master!”

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“He rode to the Saxon camp — ”

“The villain!” growled the old soldier. “But he shall pay.”

“Well, sir, well?” cried Matilda. “What then?”

“Nay, ’t is ill, not well, sweet. The Saxon duke seeks to intercept us at the Witch’s Dale beyond.”

“Can we not o’erride them?”

“Not so; his strength is too great for us, his following too many. Death blocks the path.”

“Is there no other way?”

“Alas! I know of none.”

“There must be a way,” rejoined the lady, vehemently; “we ’ve come too far and dared too much to fail.”

“Can we not leave the road and try the forest, lord?” suggested Degerberg.

“Bethink ye, man! We should be lost ere we had gone a furlong.”

“Let us turn back, then,” cried Matilda, “and strive to reach the castle and hold it.”

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“And submit ourselves to the anger of Redbeard, fair lady? Nay, too, that way is blocked. We could not maintain one tower against the king’s army, to say nothing of the duke’s. By tomorrow all South Germany will be in arms and marching toward Vohburg. We are trapped. On one side lies the army of the false Saxon, on the other the vengeance of the king.”

“What ’s to be done, then? Mean you to stand here and do nothing, sir?” cried Matilda, impatiently. “Release the king, disband thy men, and let each seek separate safety within the depths of the wood here — thou and I together, of course.”

“That ’s well thought on,” said Degerberg; “but ye must take me whither ye go.”

“Nay,” said the count, “’t is impossible. I tell thee, lady, we should starve and die in the woodland. We could not make or find a path in the forest. In

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half an hour this road will be filled with armed men. If the Duke of Saxony be wise,—and he is a proved soldier,—he will endeavor to cover every exit from the wood, and day will find us hopelessly surrounded. I cannot expose thee to such perils. Thou wouldst die.”

“But with thee, Conrad. Death so were better than life without thee. We will be together.”

“Nay, love, it cannot be.”

“What then? What can we do? What must we do?”

“Sweet Matilda,” said the heavy-hearted count at last, “we must part.”

“Nay, I swear,” she cried in sudden terror, “that shall not be. Thou wilt not send me away!”

“I must! I am resolved upon it,” returned her lover, doggedly, striving for firmness, “though it tear my heart. For, look you, lady, there is something else to consider.”

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“Something above our love, Conrad?”

“Aye, madam, the German nation. Think you, is my lord of Saxony wise enough and great enough to guide, protect, uphold this great people? Nay! The hope of the fatherland centers upon Redbeard. Even our loves must give place to that.”

“An thou wert a woman, Conrad,” said Matilda, bitterly, “thou wouldst not say so.”

“Lady, ’t is not lack of love for thee that stirs my tongue, but the welfare of the state, my duty as a soldier. Though I break my heart, though I lose my life, I must do my duty. And, look you,” he continued despairingly, “our efforts are futile. We have played a great game and lost. Heaven hath not smiled upon our hopes. The end for me is certain. I cannot allow the emperor to fall into the hands of the false, ambitious Saxon. Nay, were that to be accomplished, Henry would marry thee him-

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self, and I 'd sooner see thee bride to Barbarossa."

"That shall never be!" said the countess, firmly. "An thou reject me, I will e'en die or get me to a nunnery, there to wait for my end."

"Nay, lady; thou must live and remember me."

"Life and the thought of thee are not severed in my soul, Conrad. But what do you intend to do?"

"Save the king. I had but purposed, in the calmer light of to-morrow, to appeal to him; to show him that, while I had the power to strike the crown from his head, I would not use it; to take him into the quiet depths of the forest, and yield myself and you his prisoners. I would have appealed to the knightly heart that beats within his bosom; begged him to forego the wild passion that has o'erwhelmed his gallant soul and blinded his judgment, for which yourself, sweet Matilda, are indeed good excuse. But

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now it is too late. My duty rises before me. He goes back in safety. You must go with him. At all hazard I must save the king. Therefore I and my men will go forward to meet the Saxon."

"And do you thus lightly part from me?" she cried, in terror at the thought.

"Lightly? As God's my witness —"

"And would you so force me into the arms of the king?"

"Rather would I slay thee with my sword here in the forest."

"And I had rather thus be slain."

"Nay, love; 't is a selfish wish of mine. Perhaps it were best, after all, that you forgot me, and —"

"Forget thee? Wed a man but yesterday divorced? Take a husband wrenched from the arms of another woman? Nay, not for every jewel in his diadem! But this is idle talk, Conrad. Thou knowest I love but thee. I had liefer live an outlaw under the greenwood tree with thee than be mistress of

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the richest castle where thou art not. I will not go. I 'll not consent."

"Nay, say not so, dear heart! Thou wilt."

"Never!"

"Thou shalt! Thou must!"

"Speak you thus to me?"

"Aye; 't is necessary."

"Prefer you the king's happiness and welfare to mine?"

"That for the king! 'T is my honor, my duty, that drives me to do it, and the German fatherland."

"And choose you honor in the place of love? I love not so."

"Lady, I — you —"

The count stopped in miserable uncertainty.

"And say you 'must' to me?" continued the woman, passionately defiant. "I 'll not brook it."

"Fair Matilda," cried the count, firmly grasping her hand in his own with a pressure of the force of which he was

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ignorant, as his resolution returned to him, "thou must obey me!"

The blue eyes and the gray eyes flashed fire at each other in the moonlight. The glances crossed and met like two sword-blades.

"There is not another man in all Germany dare so speak to me!" cried the countess, hotly. "Am I thy slave, sir? Why, I am not yet even a wife! Release me! I shall go with you. You will be killed in the encounter. Earth hath nothing for me where thou art not. Thou shalt not say 'must' to me. I'll not obey thee — yet. I can wield a sword, though I be but a woman. I can strike a shrewd blow with that arm you grasp so roughly. Let me be by thy side. We shall die together."

"Forgive me," answered the count, releasing her suddenly as she spoke, and kissing her wrist where he had so rudely held it, "but 't is impossible. You know not what 't is you ask. I cannot. As

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the thought of thee, as the thought of thy love, would turn a caitiff into a very paladin, so thy presence on the field would paralyze my arm. You must go back. I 'll to save the king."

"And break my heart?"

"Ah, lady, is it so? They 'll break together, then, mine and thine. They are broken, anyhow, if we be parted; and with the Saxon Lion before us and the anger of the emperor behind us, all our plans are come to naught. But I think me that the emperor will leave thee to thy sorrow. I have raised my hand against him. When he knows that that same hand hath saved his life again, surely the honor that dwells within his royal breast will hold thee sacred as the guerdon of my dead hand. He will forgive thee, never me. The potent talisman of thy beauty—"

"'T is gone when thou art absent. When thou art away I am but a dark and haggard sorrow."

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“Nay, say not so, dearest.”

“’T is true. And hear me swear, with all a woman’s faith and upon a woman’s soul: I will never wed the Hohenstaufen. He shall have naught of me. I will die by my own hand if he do attempt to touch me.”

“I thank thee for that word, but I think thou shalt have no need.”

“It may be not.. If so, I shall bury myself in a nunnery, as I told thee, and pray for thee and think on thee until that day when we may be together for eternity, with no king to interpose his hand to bar our meeting.”

“’Sdeath! sweetheart, I’ll hold thee to that promise, that blessed vow. But time presses. We have talked too long. I must bid thee farewell.”

“Oh, Conrad,” she cried brokenly, “I cannot let you go! What wouldst thou do?”

“Change places with the king; that is, take the king’s armor wear the king’s

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helmet, cover my breast with the king's surcoat. Then I ride forward with the men and meet the Lion in the path."

"And I?"

"The king goes back to Castle Vohburg; he takes thee with him. I think he will molest thee no further when he knows all. See, here," said the count, pulling from his little finger a signet-ring. "'T will fit thy thumb, fair one. He gave it to me on the battle-ground when I lay bleeding at his feet from the blow that would have cut him down had I not interposed. He bade me ask a boon when I returned it to him, upon his knightly honor promising it should be granted. Be this thy talisman."

"Why asked you not for a revocation of the ban?"

"I saved it that I might ask a gift for thee," he replied simply. "Old Degerberg," he continued, turning to the soldier who had waited in silence the result of his master's interview with the coun-

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tess, "we have been long together; and now, good-by."

"What mean you, fair master?"

"You ride back with the king."

"By St. Bennet, master, no, I will not! What, goes a Hohenzollern into danger and old Degerberg not by? Nay, write me down a coward, then."

"Dost thou 'will not' to me, sirrah, when I say no?" cried the count, sternly. "Nay, old friend; we part not thus in anger," he continued, softening his voice to the tones of long affection. "I give thee more precious trust than my poor worthless life. Look to the empire. See his Majesty safe at Vohburg; and as thou lovest me, watch the countess, that not a hair of her head be injured. On thine own head be the charge. Nay, no words; thou hast my command. I lay it upon thee by thy years of loyal service. Upon thy allegiance, fulfil this my last behest. Now leave us for a moment. Lady, a word with you, and that an eternal farewell."

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They drew off farther in the shadow of the trees. The count leaned forward over the saddle, and as he strained her to his iron breast she clung to him in the darkness with the tenacity of despair.

“Your Majesty,” said the count, riding up to the group, “our little journey together ends here. The king, when he hath granted a boon to his faithful servant, may ride free.”

“I grant no boon to traitors. Keep me in ward or release me as thou wilt,” replied the king, contemptuously, being in ignorance of the altered circumstances and the threatened peril, of which the Swabian sergeant, true to his promise, had not yet told him.

“Sir Count, mayhap it ill becomes a common soldier to speak in the presence of king and lord; but give me leave, since you hold him prisoner, sir, to tell you,” interrupted Dietrick the Swabian, boldly, “that had I my way, my master would not be here. Your men drew off

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a little. I offered to strike down the man that barred the way; I know a path through the wood: but the king refused, saying somewhat of his plighted word. My lord, plighted words and knightly honor be for gentlefolk; give me freedom at whatever price."

"Said I not, your Majesty, that he was a brave soldier? Why, he alone is worth an army!" replied the count. "But it must be that ere the morning break you shall be safe again at Vohburg. There, ministered to by the Countess Matilda, and served by my faithful Degerberg, your Majesty may repose after the hardships of the night."

"What mean you?" cried the emperor, in surprise. "Am I indeed free? Hast repented of thy folly? But 't will serve thee nothing. There be offenses—against our person—too deep for repentance."

"Free, your Majesty, as the air, on one condition."

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“And that?”

“Before we part I must trouble your Majesty for the surcoat you wear, for the helmet that hangs at your saddle-bow; and I must ask your Majesty to honor my ancient house by allowing my golden stag to range across your kingly breast; and lastly I add this request, that your Majesty will change steeds with me.”

“How, sir?” cried the king. “You have played the fool this night, and now —”

“I would fain end it by playing the king,” answered the count. “But time presses. I entreat your Majesty to make haste.”

“Am I still a prisoner?”

“Yes, until the change be made.”

“Needs must, then,” answered the king, philosophically, dismounting from his steed. Unbuckling his sword-belt and unfastening his surcoat, he slipped them both off, and put on those the count proffered him in place. The exchange

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was effected in a few seconds. The king then mounted the count's horse, and the count mounted the king's.

"Sir Count, I love thee not, yet—disgrace not the imperial arms, I pray thee," said the king.

"Sir King, you may trust me. I shall carry the red lions of the Hohenstaufen only where honor leads."

"By the mass! thou art a recreant knight, but I believe thee. Yet I revoke not the ban. And a word of advice. Royalty is a heavy burden, even when assumed in play. Have a care!"

"My lord, I know the danger of the crown. Meantime let me return the emperor's sword," said the count, bowing and presenting it.

"And am I free now?" asked the king.

"Yes, your Majesty."

"And what if I should use my freedom and this my sword to strike you down?"

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“That might be meet, sire ; but I suggest a more fitting use for it.”

“And what is that ?”

“Degerberg shall tell thee at the Castle Vohburg. Attend me, sire. I have raised my hand against the emperor, and others of my men and this lady have done the same,” continued the count. “Let your Majesty visit your displeasure upon me alone. One of these is an old soldier my father trained, who hath cared for me since infancy — a grim nurse, your Majesty ; these others are poor men all, who have known no lord but Hohenzollern. And this last, sire, is but a woman. The emperor needs no knightly admonition, I am sure, to treat her kindly. She bears upon her person that which should move your Majesty to grant any request she might make. And so I leave them all to your mercy.”

“And thyself, man ?” questioned Barbarossa.

“When next you hear of me, sire, I

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hope that you will find expiation in the story told you, and that over my dead body your Majesty may revoke the ban. Farewell!" replied Hohenzollern, turning away.


"Explain yourself, Sir Count," the king demanded hastily. "What is it you would do?"

"Play the king a little," answered the count, slowly. "Your Majesty knows 't is a dangerous game."

"But I demand an explanation."

"You shall have it at Vohburg. Enough, sire. Press me no further. Degerberg, Matilda, farewell! May God go with you! Ride fast and hard, your Majesty. Spare neither steed nor soldier. The empire and its fate rides on the saddle with you."

Without a word the king turned, and, followed by old Degerberg and the Countess Matilda, the latter looking reluctantly back in dry-eyed despair, galloped up the road.



T was later in the night, or early in the morning, rather, when the emperor and his two companions rode up to the unguarded drawbridge still spanning the moat around Vohburg. The rapid ride had been made in silence. Degerberg was naturally taciturn; the emperor was busy with his thoughts; and Matilda was too overwhelmed at the parting to find place for unnecessary words. Barbarossa, who had led the way, reined in his panting horse before the bridge, and the others stopped about him. He

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looked keenly and curiously at the countess and the soldier in silence for a moment, and as neither seemed disposed to speak, he broke the somewhat awkward pause himself:

“Well, Countess Matilda, Captain Degerberg, what now?”

“That is for your Majesty to say,” answered Degerberg, promptly.

“What, am I no longer a prisoner?”

“You heard my master’s word, my liege.”

“And does my liberty depend upon thy master’s word?”

“Yes, sire, when I am by.”

“By the mass! thou art a bold villain,” laughed the emperor. “I like thee, gray-beard. What would you that we now do, Countess Matilda?” he added, turning to where she listlessly sat the steed.

“We are in thy hands, my liege. We must do what pleases the emperor,” she made answer, with quiet submission, all the fire gone out of her, apparently.

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“Doth that mean, now that Hohenzollern hath left thee in my charge, and is gone on what fool’s errand with our royal crown I know not, that thou wilt change thy mind and—in other sense than that of this night—take the king?”

As he spoke, with a quick motion of the hand that held the bridle, he swung his horse in nearer hers. Reaching out his disengaged hand toward her, he bent forward, his soul in his eyes. Fain would he have been loved for himself by this woman who had so engrossed his being. The flush of red mantling his face told of a passion still rampant in his heart. He had not outridden his love in the wild galloping of this eventful night.

“A fool’s errand indeed, sire, and to your shame. You speak truly. I would have wooed the count from it, but could not,” retorted the lady, resolutely. “Nay, your Majesty, plead with me no more. I weary of thy wooing,” she continued recklessly, “and I yield

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not to thy passion. The passing hours leave me still unchanged. Ah, that 's not true. Each moment finds me more determined, because I love the count the more. I am his, not thine. Thou mayest kill me, and win me so — no other way. I care not. Was ever woman so unhappy ? ”

“Art still resolved, then, to have none of me ?” cried the disappointed king, wrathfully. “I understand it not. What woman would refuse the crown ? ”

“Any one who loves as I, my lord.”

“But I myself am young, some have said not ill-favored, as hardy as the count, as skilled in arms. I — ”

“I do not love thee — that is all. Ah, sir, be as kingly as thy title. Be generous. Forget me.”

“That 's not in the power of mortal man, lady.”

“Well, then, remember me as the most unhappy maiden of thy realm, and give o'er thy suit to me. I crave your

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Majesty's permission, after this night is over, to retire to the cloister to — ”

“ ’T is an ill fate, countess — a poor burying-place for such living beauty as thine.”

“ Yet I choose it, lord.”

“ Why, what would you there ? ”

“ Pray for your Majesty's welfare and for the soul of the man I love.”

“ Is he, then, dead ? ”

“ Alas, I fear so ! ” returned the maiden, brokenly.

“ Truly this is a night of riddles as well as traitors. What mean you ? ” queried Frederick, anxiously.

“ Did he bid me speak — ” murmured the countess, hesitatingly. “ Dare I tell thee ? I — ”

“ Am I to be met on every hand,” cried the king, furiously, “ by that Hohenzollern ? By the rood ! destiny must have laid large reward in store for him in the future, else he had died long since by the hand of some vexed king he beards.”

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“We are at Vohburg, your Majesty; prescription of silence is removed, and I may tell,” said old Degerberg. “Apprised of the situation by a traitor from our following, Henry, Duke of Saxony, him they call the Lion, whose power lies to the westward yonder, hath designed to seize thy person at the Witch’s Dale.”

“This seizing of emperors is a catching disease, Master Degerberg. And what says Count Conrad to this infection of his purpose?”

“He will die in your Majesty’s stead,” answered the soldier, simply, “at the duke’s ambush in the forest.”

“And yet, methinks the two rogues have a common purpose,” continued the king, sarcastically.

“Rogues, sire!” roared Degerberg.

“The two most loyal gentle knights, I should have said. They should meet in harmony.”

“Your Majesty,” cried the countess, “you wrong the man I love!”

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“Thy ‘love’ again! Canst not keep it out of my face, woman?”

“Nay, sire, and thou shalt hear me!”

“Go on. The king hath been so commanded this night as ne’er before. ‘Shalt’ is a noble word for thy allegiance. Discourse me this, then. Canst explain the difference between the act of the count and that of the duke? Another riddle for the night.”

“My liege the count is but a simple soldier who loves, and who took arms against thee and the world for the woman he loves, for the woman who hath his heart. No traitor he! It was his purpose to take thee into the forest, and there we would submit ourselves to thy mercy.”

“The count hath, indeed, a gentle way of enforcing mercy, and thou, lady, art a noble second. Proceed, I pray you.”

“We struck thee, sir, but ’t was for love alone.”

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“Dost think that softens the blow, madam? Well, and thou, old Degerberg? Wert thou a lover, too?”

“Aye, Sir King, the lover of my master.”

“Sdeath! we all play at hearts, it seems. Continue the story, madam.”

“This Saxon, sir,” said Matilda, “would snatch thy crown from thy head —”

“And, by the mass! lady, I e’en think he might snatch my head from my shoulders in the enterprise. But is that all? May not he be a lover, too?”

“Alas! sire, it may be. Thou knowest — he did say — he did ask —”

“I marvel not at his asking, countess; but go on, and forgive my unmannerly interruptions.”

“The count hath renounced me; to do his duty, given me up, e’en me. Your Majesty knows what that means, if I may believe your Majesty’s word,” she continued, with a swift flash of intuition.

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“I do, in truth, know,” murmured the king.

“And because he knows that no hand but thine own can hold the reins of government in this our German fatherland, he hath trusted me to your knightly honor and gone forward to die in your behalf.”

“And yet he raised his hand against the king!”

“He did, my liege, and nobly doth he now atone. And now I entreat your Majesty for permission to retire from the world for the little space that is left me, all bereft. There is nothing for me, he being gone. See, sire, a ring upon my finger!” she cried, extending her hand. “Knowest thou that seal?”

“’T is mine ancient signet-ring!” cried the king, amazed. “Where got you that?”

“From the count, sire. He bade me give the guerdon to you at Vohburg, and ask your mercy, your pity for me; for

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himself, he seeketh nothing but honorable interment, and some faint remembrance at your hands as of a faithful friend."

Letting the bridle-reins fall, she clasped her hands and looked at him through eyes denied even the poor relief of tears. Never had she seemed so beautiful to him; never had he so loved her and longed for her as in that moment in the moonlight. Why not, if Hohenzollern were killed, the last obstacle removed — why not? He hesitated, wavered, stopped.

"Give me the ring," hoarsely said the king at last, after staring hard at her and fighting, in the few moments of his gaze, the first and not the least of many battles in the winning of which he became so great. And never did he appear so noble an antagonist as then. "Give me back the ring. I shall know how to deal with thee."

"I thank your Majesty," she replied,

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handing him his signet. "I trust you, sire. Would it please you to enter the castle?"

"My previous welcome was so warm a one, lady, that I scarce dare venture myself within its confines again."

"Sire, there is but one man in Germany who alone would dare lift hand against the king; and he, I think, will die before the morning. Thou mayest enter safely."

"Let me think," cried Frederick. "The Saxon will overpower Hohenzollern in the forest. That is certain. He will discover the imposture. He will gallop thither in the hope of seizing our unguarded person. His army doubtless will already be on the march. Well, he shall find me here. But I must have a messenger to ride to my camp."

"My lord, take me," exclaimed Degerberg.

"Nay, I have other work for thee. Thou art a good swordsman. I shall

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need thee here, perchance. Wilt fight for me?"

"Except it be against the Hohenzollern, I am thy man before all the world."

"I believe thee, old man, and I wish no better backing. I think I shall find another messenger in the castle," said the king, spurring his horse over the draw-bridge. As he reached the portal he stopped and motioned the countess to precede him.

"Shall I go before the king?" said Matilda.

"Enter, madam," said the emperor, tactfully. "Now I am come again as a common soldier, thy guest, and I would fain have another welcome."

Bowing her head in appreciation of his kindness in reëstablishing his footing so gracefully, the countess cantered through the gate, wheeled her horse, and as the king followed she extended her hand.

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“My castle and all that are here are thine, your Majesty.”

“With one reservation,” said the king.

“Nay, sire; so far as a maiden promised can say it, with no reservations at all.”

“And Eckhardt — where is he? The castle hath a lonely look.”

“What, ho, my steward! Hither, knaves!” cried the countess, her voice ringing through the courtyard.

Presently the old majordomo came timidly around the corner of the keep. In compliance with their mistress’ direction, the other servants had sought safety in hiding, and the castle was deserted save by this faithful old man.

“Ah, sirrah,” cried the king, “thou art the garrison, it seems. Well, where is the Baron Eckhardt?”

“I think where we put him four hours since, my sovereign lord, in the great hall of the castle.”

“Let us go thither,” said Frederick,

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dismounting, and lifting Matilda from her saddle.

They found the unhappy Baron Eckhardt still fast in the chair to which his captors had bound him. He had struggled furiously but unavailingly to release himself, inspired equally, perhaps, by desire for liberty and the proximity of a huge flagon of rare old Rhenish as yet untasted. By a sign the king ordered Degerberg to cut the bonds. The baron struggled to his feet, saluted, and then stretched his stiffened joints by a few mighty movements.

“Saving your Majesty’s grace,” he cried, instantly reaching for the flagon and taking a prodigious draught. “Ah,” he sputtered, as he put the bottle down, “the caitiff knaves seized me from behind, and tied and gagged me, leaving me here alone like a trussed fowl, curses on them! And then, sire, to make the punishment doubly damnable, they left that flagon within reaching distance of

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my very nose, and yet I could not drink. By the mass! your Majesty, 't was fearful punishment for a thirsty man!"

"To it again, man!" roared the king, bursting into laughter. "Refresh thyself. I need thee now."

The thirsty baron needed no second permission, and when he dropped the huge flagon it was considerably lighter than it had been when he lifted it up.

"Now, sire," he cried, "where be those that tied me thus unmannerly?"

"Nay, baron; 't was but a jest."

"Whose, sire? By St. Boniface! I like not such pleasantries. Let me see the man that hath ta'en such liberties with me. I would fain argue the matter with him at the point of the sword. There 's wit in that."

"Thou canst not do it, baron. 'T was a lady. She stands here," answered the king, pointing to the countess.

"By St. Boniface! madam," exclaimed the hard-bitten old soldier, in wrath at



“ ‘By the mass! your Majesty, ’t was fearful punishment for a thirsty man!’ ”

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this feminine check to his pugnacious and natural desire, "I would thou wert a man and wore a sword! I —"

"Nay, baron," interrupted Barbarossa; "'t was my jest, too."

"A royal jest, indeed, sire, and, like most jests of the kind, the humor is all with the king."

"Enough!" commanded Frederick, changing his mood suddenly. "Thou art free now, and mayest be thankful to have escaped with thy life. I too have been in peril, and still am, and I have need of thee. Canst ride?"

"If I may have another draught of the Rhenish."

"Nay, thou shalt not. Thou hast had enough. Thou couldst not stick on thy horse after another such potation. Come, Henry the Lion is on our path. With over a hundred knights, he ranges the Black Forest in search of us, and his power as well advances from the camp to the westward yonder. Ride with

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speed to the Archbishop of Mainz, in command of our army, and bring hither some five hundred knights and men-at-arms. Let them not stay spur nor spare steed. They must be here by break of day. And bid his reverence break camp and set the army in motion instantly. He will be speedy for a fight, I trow. We will meet this Lion in his path, and pluck his claws, and send him back to Saxony as meek as a sucking dove—if we let him go at all! Canst ride, I say?”

“Your Majesty,” answered the baron, all his indifference gone, standing very straight and soldier-like before his king, “I shall be back at the head of your soldiers before you have time to miss me.”

“Then go.”

“Yes, sire. My lady, farewell. When next you jest, I pray you, choose a merrier subject for your pleasantry.”

The baron turned, and, in defiance of etiquette, after one longing and compre-

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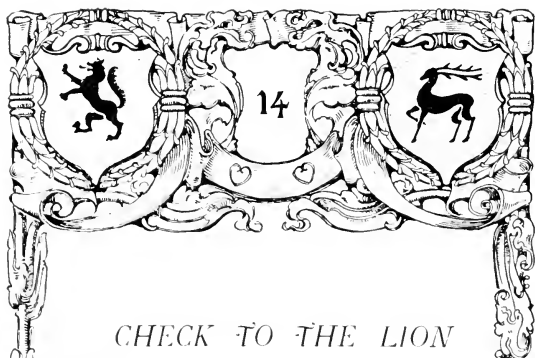
hensive glance at the flagon, ran from the room.

“Wouldst retire, lady? Old Degerberg and I will watch. There yet remains a little time before day. Thou shalt be safe, and perchance find rest.”

“Nay, your Majesty; there can be no sleep for me until — until — I — hear the news.”

“An thou wilt, countess. If I mistake not, we shall have visitors soon,” answered the emperor. “Therefore, let us return to the great hall and there wait. I could wish with thee that with the morning may come better tidings of — thy love.”

He said this word with a mighty effort, and the grateful woman divined what it had cost him.



CHECK TO THE LION



OR a moment after the departure of king, squire, and love, Conrad von Hohenzollern sat his horse in perfect silence, his eyes strained out into the night after the three retreating figures. Long after they had disappeared in the darkness he listened until the footfalls of their horses had died away. Even then he seemed loath to move, and might have delayed longer had not the Swabian soldier ventured to address him and proclaim the need for prompt action.

“What, soldier,” cried Hohenzollern,

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“art still here? Why went you not to safety with your emperor?”

“By the rood! lord, I like a gallant deed, and would fain enjoy a merry sword-play under the advanced banner of a brave knight. It seems to me that the emperor will soon be in safety. His way is the way of peace, while yours is the path of swords. In short, lord, I go with you that I may strike back at the Saxon dogs.”

“That were a well day in which I met you, Dietrick, and you shall have a post of honor. You shall ride first and bear me company this night in the vaward of our force. Men,” he cried, turning to his listening retainers, “you may have guessed somewhat of the situation from what you have heard me say and seen me do. The black-hearted Italian traitor rode to the camp of the Saxon duke, and then made him aware of our undertaking. Henry the Lion gallops hard to intercept us at the Witch’s Dale, me to

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kill, the king to take. He 'll wait us there. We be masterless men, but not traitors. I sent the emperor back. I wear his armor. I go forward with this Swabian soldier, not to disappoint the Lion. Who goes with me? Let him that will step forward."

Every man responded to the bold appeal.

"I warn ye that there will be hard fighting in the pass."

"'T is no matter, master," said old Hans, the veteran soldier, acting again as spokesman; "'t is no matter to us while under your banner. But, by the mass, lord, 't is not your banner, after all! We miss the golden stag —"

"True, soldier," returned the count; "but mayhap you will fight as well under the king's blazonry as under mine; and remember that, though I wear the crown and sport the lion, it is but your overlord who leads you. I like your spirit, lads! Let him that survives the

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melley, if he can do so, get speech with the emperor. I warrant ye he will not lack reward. Let him tell the Countess Matilda, an I escape not, which seemeth most like, how Conrad von Hohenzollern died. For the rest, I myself will lead with this Swabian gallant by my side. The rest of you will follow in order by fours in closed ranks. Be in readiness all, and when ye hear my battle-cry, or it may be the imperial call, strike right and left, and die fighting or win through, as God may please. One thing: should any of you see the Italian, cut him down without mercy. And now, helm you all; look to your weapons; loose sword in scabbard; see that the battle-ax swings light to hand; slip firmly the left arm within the circlets of the shields. Now, may God keep us, Christ assoil us. A soldier's prayer all, and then—forward!"

As the count ceased speaking, after a brief interval of muttered devotions, the

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men busied themselves in looking to their war-gear, while, with the assistance of his Swabian squire, Hohenzollern donned the heavy helmet of the emperor, its golden crown gleaming luridly around the black steel in the moonlight. Presently, keeping well together, they all cantered gently down the road.

A half-mile farther the road sloped rapidly down the hill, crossed a brawling little stream, and wound through a narrow, craggy pass before it began the ascent of the hill on the other side. Beneath the shelter of the rocks, and concealed among the trees, were perhaps one hundred and fifty valiant knights and seasoned men-at-arms, commanded by the Saxon prince in person. Their hard riding had been successful; they had reached the appointed spot in good time and had been disposed in cunning ambush by the duke and his veteran captains. Although they were entirely ignorant that the advancing force of the

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count was aware of their presence,— for, in the hurry and confusion, the escape of the Swabian had not been discovered,— they neglected no precaution that much experience in warfare could suggest. Not a light was shown, and the men kept to their posts in a silence which even the horses seemed to share. What little sound of motion they made was drowned by the noise of the brook dashing over its stony bed. The death-trap was ready, waiting only the advent of the prey to be sprung.

As the count's men drew near, they rode with seeming carelessness, though had it been daytime their readiness for battle would have been discovered as soon as they came in sight. Each man was no less prepared, in fact, than were the liers-in-wait who hid in the pass. Swords were out, lances poised, massive battle-axes ready at the saddle-bow for the grasp of master hands. Shields were thrust protectingly forward on left

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arms as the whole band pricked gently along.

In the excitement of the coming moment Conrad scarcely even remembered Matilda; he completely forgot the king. The rocks cast deep shadows over the road. The knight and his squire, followed by the rest, plunged forward into the darkness. To carry out the effect of unsuspection, Conrad laughed loudly, as if at some jest, as he entered the shadow. The hollow laughter from out the helmet bars rang wildly among the crags and cliffs about them through the night. At the same instant a Saxon soldier on foot sprang out of the darkness and seized the count's horse.

“Halt!” he cried. “The way is —”

There was a shortening of a mighty arm, a swift thrust from a keen sword. The soldier, struck in the throat, uttered no cry, but fell backward, crashing upon the road, dragging the sword from Hohenzollern's hand. Another man instantly

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sprang up as if by magic out of nothing. He, too, barred the way. The Swabian cut him down. Now the tramp of horses was heard. On each side shadowy forms sprang from the darkness of the wood. The road seemed filled with moving men. The count seized his mighty battle-ax, an awful weapon for close quarters when backed by so powerful an arm. "Yield you!" cried the foremost knight, spurring toward the count, sword in hand. "Resistance is useless; you are outnumbered. We want the king!"

"Take him, then!" shouted Hohenzollern, spurring his horse forward. Before the advancing knight could take his guard, the heavy ax whirled in the air and came crashing down upon the flat-topped helmet, fairly beating it into the man's shoulders. He reeled backward in the saddle, and, as his horse reared, fell to the ground dead. Concealment was at an end.

"Hohenstaufen!" roared the count, in

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a voice of thunder. "On them! The avalanche from the mountains! Hohenzollern! Forward, the stag! Strike for the king! A Waibling! A Waibling!"

The astonished men in the ambush found themselves instantly beset by the bold attackers. The force of the unexpected onset drove them back from the narrow pass into the open road. Sword rang against sword; sparks flashed from the steel contact in the black night air. Shouting his war-cry again, and followed hard by the Swabian and the rest, Conrad sprang into the very midst of his foes. Whirling the great battle-ax about him as if it had been a toy, he beat down foe-man after foe-man. Bethinking himself after a while, even in the hurry of the fight, of his assumption of the crown, he changed his battle-cry into,

"For the king! Barbarossa!"

Duke Henry's struggling men were not quiet in the darkness, either, and



“On them! . . . Hohenzollern! . . . Strike for
the king! . . .”

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shouts of "The Lion of Saxony!" "A Welf! A Welf!"¹ mingled with the war-cries of Hohenzollern's devoted band.

After the combat had continued for a brief space, especially as the struggling men drifted across a bar of moonlight, the small number of the count's party became apparent to the Saxons, who had at first given ground. They took fresh heart, therefore, and under the vigorous leadership of Henry himself, who did wonders in the front of his battle-line, they gradually overcame the stout resistance.

When fully one half of Conrad's men had been slain, he himself, his horse being killed, was beaten down by battle-axes in half a dozen hands. The very numbers of his attackers gave him a certain immunity, and proved his salvation, since not one had room or time to get in a finishing blow. As he sank senseless to

¹ The beginning of the famous parties and war-cries "Guelf!" and "Ghibelline!"

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the ground, covered with wounds, resistance ceased, not because his own men yielded, but simply because they were overpowered.

Most of those who had survived the fray were bleeding from many wounds, and the number of the dead on the other side about equaled the number of Hohenzollern's men. Strange to say, the Swabian soldier, who had fought valiantly, had escaped all injury ; but, with a design of his own, he lay upon the ground as if he were dead, and in the darkness and confusion again escaped notice.

As the last of Hohenzollern's men fell beneath the overwhelming numbers of the Saxons, the voice of the duke, who was panting from his violent exertions, rang hoarsely over the field.

"Lights !" he cried. "Back up the path, some of you, and bring them hither quickly. Let us see what prizes our swords have won."

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Even as he spoke, some of his men, having heard the call, came racing down the cross-road from a sheltered place where a fire had been built out of sight, bearing pine torches in their hands, which they distributed to the knights and men-at-arms.

“Search all!” cried the duke, himself seizing a torch. “If any body bear a coat of arms, apprise me immediately. Ser Giovanni, come thou with me.”

“Aye, my lord, I am here,” cried the Italian, from the outside of the ring of men surrounding the duke, as he pushed his way through them.

The darkness had prevented the fact that he had taken no part in the fray being noticed. Now that the battle was over, he came on the field like a bird of prey. The simile was suggested to the fiery duke by the vulture-like face of the traitor.

“Come thou with me, sirrah, and we will seek what we may find.”

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“Hast not forgot Wiltenstein, my emperor that shall be?” fawningly whispered the Italian as he stepped nearer to him.

“I would I could, sirrah.”

“But your word, Sir Duke?”

“Is pledged and will be kept. Must I assure thee twice? Come, we’ll search the field.”

As the duke spoke, the group separated, and under the guidance of the knights and officers the men began to look over the bodies by the light of their flickering torches. Though short, the melley had been fierce, and the ground was covered with dead and dying. The eye of the duke swiftly scanned the few panting prisoners securely held by his men. The object of his search was not among them. Eagerly he turned to the bodies on the ground; in the dim light it was difficult to identify any of them. Accompanied by the Italian, he nevertheless scrutinized each separate one carefully in an endeavor to identify it. Most of them they

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passed by, as they were seen to be persons of little note, until presently they came to the spot where the count had fallen.

“**Ha!** what have we here?” cried the prince, snatching a second torch from the nearest man-at-arms and holding both down to the ground. “By heavens, there is a crown upon the helmet, lions on the shield! ’T is the Barbarossa—the emperor! God! We have killed him! I meant not this. By the mass! sir, how came this to pass? ’T is untoward. And where lieth the Count Hohenzollern? You should know him; he was your master.”

“I see him not, lord,” answered the Italian. “**He** must have escaped. Perhaps he fled the field when he heard the combat.”

“Thou liest, thou traitorous dog!” came a voice from the darkness. “**He** was a brave soldier, and had he lived would have requited thy betraying treachery thus!”

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The Swabian had sprung to his feet with the quickness of thought, and, before any one could intercept him, had seized the astonished Italian by the throat and struck at him viciously with his dagger, plunging the steel weapon again and again in his body. Releasing the stricken man, he seized the reeking weapon by the blade, flung it full in the face of the duke and, before any one could stop him, with the shout, "This for the Barbarossa and the Hohenzollern!" plunged through the scattered line of men, and was lost in the darkness. Pursuit was useless, and after a few moments was given over.

The Saxon duke had lowered his head as the missile sped toward him, perhaps to look at the falling figure of the traitor, and the heavy hilt of the dagger struck the steel cap which had replaced his massive helmet. The force of the blow stunned him for a moment, and he staggered and would have fallen had not his

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men rushed to his assistance — all of which facilitated Dietrick's escape. The duke recovered himself presently, however, and bade those nearest him to look to the prostrate Italian.

"He 's dead, my liege," answered one of the knights, after a brief inspection. "He hath a dozen wounds, each deep enough to kill him."

"'T is well: we save our manor of Wiltenstein for a worthier tenant," replied the duke, disdainfully. "We use and profit by, but like not, a traitor. The dog were better dead. Look now to the king, and search eagerly for the Count Hohenzollern. I never heard he was a coward. He must be here. These are his men whom we have taken; they wear his cognizance. Know ye aught of your master, men?" he cried.

"He led us into the fray, as was his wont, lord," answered one of the soldiers, "and that 's all we know."

"He must have broken through, then;

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yet no one came near me in the road. Have you yet unhelmed the emperor ? ”

“ In a moment, lord,” cried the knights about the body.

Presently they cut the lacings and drew the helmet from the count’s head. Again the duke thrust down the torch.

“ By the mass ! ” he exclaimed, “ here ’s a strange mistake ! We have failed, men. I see not the red beard. This is no emperor, yet he wears the imperial crown. These are the royal lions. Who is ’t — ”

“ By your leave, sir,” said one of the captives, bending forward, “ ’t is the Count Hohenzollern, whom we serve. Your Majesty sees now that he was no coward.”

“ No, faith ! a stout warrior. But the emperor — was he not with you ? ”

“ He was, sire, but — ”

The soldier hesitated.

“ Where, then, is he now ? ”

“ Tell not, soldier ! ” cried a faint voice from the ground.

CHECK TO THE LION

“Art thou alive, then?” said the duke, bending over the count. “Pity thou hadst not died on this field. The ban is over thee. But the emperor, where is he?”

“Seek, your Highness, and perhaps you may find to your disadvantage,” replied Hohenzollern, raising himself slowly on his arms.

“That ’s as may be; I ’ll e’en be the judge of that,” replied the duke. “I thought to take him here to-night; that you—”

“I divine your mind, Sir Saxon,” said the count. “You thought, told by a base traitor, that I had taken the emperor; that you could kill me, and perchance him as well, in the hope that others would think that I, a banned man, had done it. But I have beaten you, my lord. The king ’s in safety, and I am still alive. By the mass! though somewhat stiff from wounds and weak from loss of blood, I think I could still strike a shrewd blow or two an I had a chance.”

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As he spoke he struggled to his feet, the faintness having passed somewhat from him; and though he trembled from his wounds, he nevertheless stood bold and gallant, facing the Saxon. The latter was in great perturbation and perplexity. He had made a bold stroke for empire, and it had failed. He shrewdly surmised that he too had been betrayed, that word had been carried to the count of his enterprise, and that he had taken this way of saving the king. He had disclosed his hand, made his attack, and got nothing for his pains.

He thought hard and intensely for a moment, and finally began to see light in the darkness of the situation. The natural place to which the emperor should have repaired was the castle of Vohburg. In fact, the road down which the count had come led nowhere but there. The emperor would never roam the woods alone. He must be at the castle. He knew the emperor's army

CHECK TO THE LION

lay some eight miles away in the other direction. His own was much nearer. He would send a messenger to accelerate its march. If he should push forward to the castle with his present party, which would greatly outnumber any force in the castle or which the emperor had brought with him,—which must, he reasoned, have been inconsiderable, else the emperor never would have been captured by Hohenzollern,—he might yet be in time to seize his royal quarry and win the game. If his army reached the castle first they could easily hold it and the king against the whole power of the empire. All was not lost!

In any event, it flashed upon him that he held a valuable piece in the person of Hohenzollern. The man had committed the crime of high treason. Actually he not only had drawn sword upon, but had captured, the emperor. It would be easy to say that word of this had come to him, and he had ridden forth

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that night to rescue the kaiser. The Italian, dead, could not contradict him. He would ride at full speed to the castle of Vohburg. If he found Frederick alone he would take him. If, as was scarcely likely, he was surrounded by such force as to make it impracticable, he would win the king's favor by giving him the person of the count, and then bide his time for a better opportunity to strike. Henry the Lion might have been called Henry the Fox, so shrewd, so simple, so brilliant was this little plan which, in either event, did not appear to admit the possibility of failure.

"Art in the mood for riding, count?" he said at last.

"Yes, your Highness. I started out to ride the night, and though I did not count upon this little interruption, I trust I am able still to do my part."

"Some of you bind his hands behind his back with the belts of the dead soldiers there," said the duke.

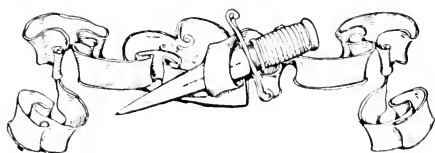
CHECK TO THE LION

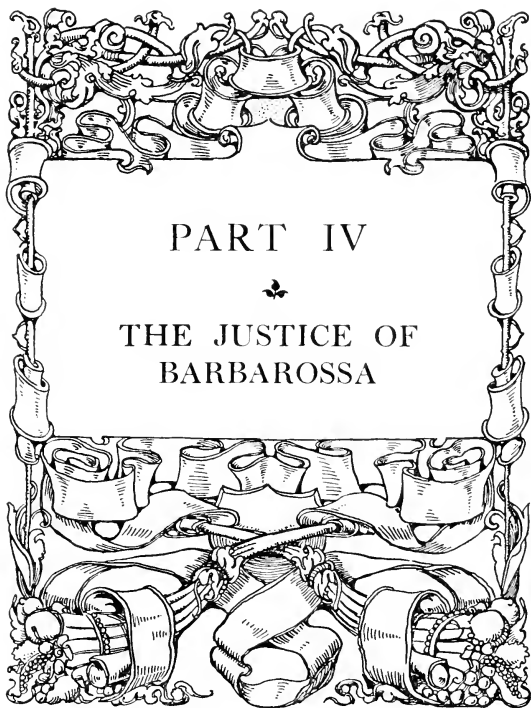
“My lord,” cried **Hohenzollern**, in surprised wrath, “this indignity to me, a belted knight, a soldier of the empire! My word —”

“Silence, sir! The word of a man under a ban is worth nothing. His Majesty’s anger hath absolved you from your oaths. We take you back to **Vohburg** as the most acceptable present to the **Hohenstaufen**. Mount him upon his horse, knaves. You, Sir **Siegfried**, ride back on the cross-road to the camp, and bid the Count **Eginhard** send a party here to bury the dead and look after the wounded, and then bid him carry out my order and move instantly toward the castle of **Vohburg** with all our power, if he be not started, and to go at full speed, too. We go to do honor to the king. Take my signet as your warrant. As for the rest, a dozen of you guard the bound prisoners, and follow with them as fast as you can upon our path. Look to your horses, you gentle-

HOHENZOLLERN

men who accompany me ; see that none of you take a wounded animal. Exchange them with those of the guard of the prisoners, and he that is not well mounted, let him stay behind. Now, then, form up, men ; two of you take the bridle of the count's horse. Forward ! Let us gallop."

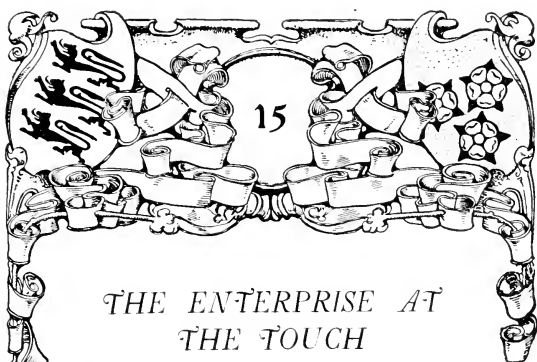




PART IV



THE JUSTICE OF
BARBAROSSA



THE cavalcade swept on in the dark on the track of the emperor, the Countess Matilda, and old Degerberg. They rode at desperate speed, sparing nothing, and many, thrown aside by the killing pace, were left behind. Still, nearly a hundred approached the castle with the duke.

When they reached the confines of the forest opposite Vohburg, by the duke's orders the party halted where they were, well within the wood, and he himself, accompanied by two of his most

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trusted knights, rode forward to reconnoiter the situation. He was too good a soldier to gallop recklessly into a possible danger. He would see what was before him ere he advanced. His own ambushade had been so successful thus far, although the greater prey had not yet fallen to him, that he would not jeopard his plans by any act of imprudence.

He had thought long and deeply, during his long, hard ride, and had quite made up his mind. His way was clear. If, when he reached the castle, he found it still unguarded, and the king and countess there, he would seize them both. Then he would have in his power the three people who had thwarted him, and with whom and for whom he had struggled at that memorable Diet at Frankfort.

As to what he should do with them when he had them he was equally clear. The woman he would marry, the count

AT THE TOUCH

he would kill. The king he would force to resign the throne; in which case it was certain, or he could make it so, he thought, that the choice of the electors would fall upon him. If the king should refuse to resign? Well, so much the worse for the king. The grim look which darkened his face whenever the thought of that contingency came to him showed to what lengths he was prepared to go.

Therefore it was with a wildly beating heart that he galloped ahead of the troop, reined in his horse under the shadow of the forest border, and peered eagerly across the open at the black mass of Vohburg. The moon had set some time since, but the first pearly grayness of the dawn had already begun to show itself faintly in the eastern sky, and the gaunt towers of the ancient castle lifted themselves against it, hoary, somber, and forbidding.

The fires in the cressets over the gate-

HOHENZOLLERN

way fronting the drawbridge, which was still down — the duke noticed with pleasure — had burned nearly out during the long night, and now gave forth but a dim glow. The whole front of the castle was in dark shadow, relieved at the keep tower, in which was the great hall, by pale beams of faint, yellow light struggling through the horn-covered casements. No warder watched the gate, no sentry paced the walls, no soldier guarded the keep. All was silence, the intense silence of that last still hour before the dawn.

A sort of awe fell upon the hardy soul of the duke as he gazed. He was playing for a great stake,—love and crown, a woman and an empire, all that men ask for,—and he had a longed-for chance at last to feed fat his ancient grudge against the Swabian and gratify his passion for revenge. But all was so dark and so still yonder. What was behind those towers? What danger

AT THE TOUCH

lurked within those walls? What mighty opportunity waited his compelling grasp upon it?

For a moment he sat his horse motionless under the spell. Another hour would perhaps see him lord of the world—and of one woman; or companionless, and entitled to but six feet of the earth beneath him. But the exigency was too pressing, the time too short to waste in dreams.

Recovering himself by an effort, he pricked gently forward into the road. His glance turned first to the east, whence his power was to come. With his ear attuned to catch any sound, he listened. He could neither see nor hear anything. The road stretched straight away east and west for a long distance. There was nothing to the right of him; his own men were not there. With a muttered oath of disappointment he swung about and peered into the blackness to the westward,

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piercing the darkness with the intensity of his gaze. There was nothing there, either; his ear caught no tramp of horse, nor clank of steel-clad soldiery on the march. If his own army was not approaching, neither was that of the emperor. He heaved a sigh of relief. He was in time.

“Back, one of you, and bring up the rest,” he said softly. “Come quickly, but with no unnecessary noise. We have little time to lose.”

In a few moments his hard riders were abreast of him. A few quick orders, and they were ready.

“Yonder,” said the duke, pointing to the castle, “lies a crown for the taking. I take it. In half an hour the empire is mine. In my advancement ye all share. Forward!”

Possibility of concealment was at an end. The duke in the lead, the party struck spurs in steeds and dashed for the gateway. The hoofs of the horses

AT THE TOUCH

rang hollow thunder as they clattered over the drawbridge and poured into the deserted courtyard, which was filled with trampling horses.

“Dismount all,” cried the duke, suiting his action to his word, “and follow me.”

Baring his blade as he spoke, he darted at the inner steps which led to the hall, and ran lightly up them, crying:

“Now for the king!”

Out of the darkness in a distant tower a woman’s shrill scream rose high above the confusion in the courtyard. The sound of it struck a chill to the heart of Conrad von Hohenzollern. Still bound, he had been lifted from the saddle and dragged roughly toward the steps by two of his captors. A woman’s cry, fraught with surprise and terror. Was it Matilda? What was happening? In greater anxiety than that of all the rest, he plunged up the stair.

The count was in a pitiable plight. The daring seizure of the king, the ride

HOHENZOLLERN

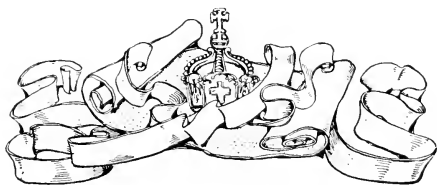
into the forest, the dreadful decision forced upon him by the advent of the Saxon, the battle in the pass, the headlong dash to Vohburg—these fatigues and anxieties he might have sustained without much difficulty. Men were hardy indeed in those days—hard riders, hard fighters, and hard lovers. But the count had been sorely wounded in the fray; he had lost much blood in the long ride, and in the last mile or two he had scarce been able to keep the saddle without assistance. And his mental state was worse than his physical condition. He had staked all on his capture of the king and lost. Life, love, everything, was gone. Despair rode beside him on the horse. Bound, helpless, alone among his enemies, it would soon be over. Well, let it come. Fate could do no worse than part him from Matilda. If he could but have assurance that she would be safe, unmolested, he could die—if not happy, at least content.

AT THE TOUCH

But that scream — what did it mean? Writhing in his bonds, he struggled after the rest, praying, as he never prayed before, for a moment of freedom and a sword.

The Saxon knights and soldiers, shouting and yelling, crowded after their duke, filling the stair with noise and tumult.

No one barred their way as they ascended the steps, entered the massive portal, traversed the antechamber, and burst through the hangings over the door. Old Heinrich, the steward, was crouching in terror on the stairs, and they swept him into the room with them.





*THE KING WOULD FAIN
ATONE*



OW the time had dragged to the watchers in the great, lonely castle! When the sound of the echoing hoof-beats of Eckhardt's horse had died away in the courtyard, they had entered the great hall and had resigned themselves to that hardest of all tasks — waiting. But a few hours before, the Countess Matilda had sat in that very hall and had waited the arrival of lover or king. Now the king was there, the lover dead in all probability, and she was still waiting. Waiting for what? she wondered.

THE KING WOULD FAIN ATONE

The full force of the situation at last came upon her. During the night there had been something at every moment to distract her, even the mechanical necessity of guiding her horse had in some small measure taken her mind from her trouble; but now in the stillness of that great hall the whole situation rose before her, and with every fiber of her being she rebelled against the monarch whose mad passion had brought about this state of affairs. She gazed upon him with such bitter scorn and resentment in her look that the king writhed under it. Finally she put her head down in her hands, where she sat on a low stool, and rocked and shook in tearless agony; and every motion appealed to the better nature of Barbarossa. He loved her still, but the purifying touch of sorrow—her sorrow—burned away some of the selfishness of his desire. He walked over to her and laid his hand upon her head, and at his touch she shuddered away.

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“Nay,” he whispered, cut to the heart by this spontaneous evidence of her abhorrence, but brought perhaps to a keener realization of how he must appear in her sight — “nay, lady, grieve not. I will atone. Thou shalt see what man or king may do.”

“Canst give back life to him I love, sire?”

“Nay,” said the king, “why should the duke seek the life of the count?”

“Hapest thou aught from the mercy of the duke, sire?” asked Matilda.

“Little from that, lady, but more from his policy. He hath a hostage in the person of Hohenzollern too valuable to throw away at present. I think that yet the game is our own, and this distempered night may end happily for you, if not for me.”

“Your Majesty gives me but little hope, but I thank you for your good purpose. Why stayed you here, sire? Why rode you not away with Baron Eckhardt?”

THE KING WOULD FAIN ATONE

“Lady, I stayed for — for —”

“Was it for my sake?”

“’T was the least that I could do for thee, having brought things to such a pass.”

“Thou wert foolish, sire.”

“I could not leave thee to the Saxon.”

“Think you he will soon be here?”

“As fast as horses may carry him. I judge him by myself.”

“And then?”

“Why, then we will play with him and mesh him in his own intrigue, catch him in his own springe, and settle his rebellious claims once for all.”

“But if the count be dead?”

“He shall be avenged, then, by my beard!”

“And will the vengeance of the king give me back my lover? Nay, your Majesty,” she continued hopelessly; “leave me alone. An day bring not the count —”

She threw her hands up with a despair-

HOHENZOLLERN

ing gesture, and then buried her face in them once more.

“A horseman, sire! I do hear him in the forest yonder. Listen,” cried old Degerberg, who had stood impassibly leaning upon his ax.

“’T is so,” said the king, after a moment of attentive silence.

“A single horseman, your Majesty,” added Degerberg.

“The Saxon prince?” cried Matilda, springing to her feet.

“There is scarce time yet, nor would he come alone. Go you to the court, Degerberg, and see who ’t is. I ’ll trust you to deal with any single man in our empire. This may be news, countess. Perchance Hohenzollern —”

“Nay, sire; he would never leave the field of battle and come back alone.”

“True, true; but who can it be then?” he added curiously.

“’T is I, your Majesty,” panted a hoarse voice, as a man, white and exhausted

THE KING WOULD FAIN ATONE

from desperate riding, entered the room, followed by Degerberg.

“My Swabian soldier!” cried the king.

“Never more thine than this moment, your Majesty.”

“Thy news?” questioned the king.

“The lord count?” said Matilda, springing toward him.

“Sire, there was a battle in the pass. We rode forward hardily and did valiantly.”

“The count, my God, the count?” interrupted the woman, wild with anxiety.

“Aye, what of him?” asked the king.

“My liege, I —”

“Speak! speak!”

“I left him on the field.”

The countess reeled and would have fallen had not the king caught her.

“But not dead?” cried Frederick.

Never in his life, it seemed, had he been so anxious to receive assurance of a man’s welfare as at that moment.

HOHENZOLLERN

“Sire, I know not. He was stricken down after much fighting,—by the mass! sire, what a swordsman!—shouting thy battle-cry, hammering his foes, right worthily bearing thy crown, many brave knights feeling the weight of his arm.”

“But was he killed? I know the count. I have seen him fight, and felt his arm in this tower but a few hours ago. But was he killed, I say?”

“I hope not, sire.”

“You left him —”

“Yes, your Majesty. I bore my part on the field and did my duty there, and when the battle was over I lay still in the darkness until that Italian traitor came by with the Saxon duke, and then I struck the dog down, hurled my dagger at the duke, and fled to warn thee. I think they will be here anon.”

“Thou art welcome, soldier. There’s wine in the refectory: Eckhardt left a little against his will. By your leave, lady, I’ll dispense your hospitality.”



“The countess reeled and would have fallen had not the king caught her.”

THE KING WOULD FAIN ATONE

“Yes, yes, my king, do what you will,” murmured the countess, faintly.

“Degerberg, take him there. Refresh him, and hasten. I may soon have need of both your arms.”

As the two men left the hall, the king turned to the countess again.

“Courage, lady,” he cried buoyantly. “All ’s not yet lost. The count will take a deal of hammering before he dies, I trow. Why, he has to live for thee! The waiting will be but little longer now. They will be here soon. I have confidence in Eckhardt. We will play with the Saxon, first amuse him until my soldiers arrive, and then — Now, what ’s that?” he cried suddenly. “Horsemen again, and the sound from the south.”

“My liege,” said Degerberg, coming into the room, followed by Dietrick, wiping his lips, “dost hear them? They are coming yonder.”

“Well, we are ready for them,” cried

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the king. "In a few moments Eckhardt will be here."

"Shall we meet them on the draw-bridge, your Majesty?" cried the Swabian. "Captain Degerberg and I can hold them in play for some space ere we be cut down."

"Aye," said the veteran, lifting his ax. "Let us try it, sire."

"Nay," returned the king; "it were ill done to throw away the lives of two such men-at-arms merely to gain a little time. I need thee here. We will let them all come in, then when Eckhardt comes we will have them trapped."

"Ah, but if he do not come, sire?" inquired Matilda.

"Well, lady, this old hall will see such a fray as it never saw before, and we three champions will die such a death as the world will talk about to its latest day," cried the king, daringly, his face flushing, his eye lighting at the thought of combat.

THE KING WOULD FAIN ATONE

A sudden cry, a shouting, broke forth beyond the walls and beat into the hall through the casements.


“Ha!” said the king, “it is the Saxon indeed. He hath reconnoitered, assembled his power, and now for a charge! Listen! They are on the drawbridge. In the courtyard now. Look to your weapons all! Lady Matilda, sit you there. Degerberg, attend me. Go thou behind the elbow of the fireplace, Dietrick, and be silent until I call thee; but be ready.”

The woman’s scream that had paralyzed the count was now heard faintly by the king.

“What voice is that?” he cried.

“’T is Gertrude’s, my foster-mother, awake at last.”

“Ah,” laughed the king, “while youth and love have battled for a woman and an empire, age hath slept the night peacefully away.”



THE first man to enter the room was the Duke of Saxony. Immediately following him was the Count of Hohenzollern, his head bare, his hands bound, and men-at-arms on each side of him holding the ropes. His face was very pale, but he held his head up, and seemed for all the world like a mighty stag in leash.

After these two came a mixed array of knights and soldiers. They had laid aside their heavy war-helms, but all had drawn the hoods of their hauberks over

THE LOYALTY OF THE SAXON

their heads, and each wore the customary steel cap. Those who had swords had bared them, and those who bore battle-axes held them swinging lightly in hand. The shields of all were advanced as if to meet a foe. The light from the torches and the roaring fire was reflected from mirroring shields and burnished weapons, and the room seemed full of shining steel. The little party halted, by the direction of their leader, at the lower end of the hall. The Saxon duke then motioned to the prisoner, and, followed by him, stepped forward nearer the fire-place.

As they advanced, the light fell full upon the prisoner. With a cry that made the black rafters ring, the Countess Matilda sprang to her feet and stared beyond the duke at the noble figure of the count.

“Conrad!” she screamed. “Is it indeed thou, and alive? Praised be God!”

She sprang toward him, only to find

HOHENZOLLERN

her way barred by the blade of Henry the Lion.

“Alive yet, thank God! lady,” cried Hohenzollern; “but in parlous case, I fear me. Strive not to come nearer. Presently—”

“My lord,” said the Saxon duke, turning to the emperor, who had stood in perfect silence during the entrance and this little scene.

“Sheathe thy sword, prince, doff thy cap, and bend thy knee when thou approachest thy emperor!” he thundered.

Henry the Lion hesitated, not from fear, but because the time was not yet ripe for action. He was a wise prince, however, as well as a brave one, and he reflected that the form of allegiance to his emperor cost him nothing.

“My liege,” he said, suiting the action to the word, “I bend the knee in homage; as for the cap, it fits my head as tightly as thy crown; and that I carry

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my bared sword, it hath been drawn this night in your Majesty's service."

"Right welcome news is that, Duke of the Saxons. We had not known thou wert so ready in our service. Whom have you here?"

"The sometime Count of Hohenzollern, my liege, a traitor under the empire's ban, whom I now deliver to your Majesty."

"And he wears the lions of the Hohenstaufen! By the rood! 't is strange! Hast thought of making thyself a Cæsar, Sir Count?"

"Sire," replied the count, smiling boldly, "'t is true that for an hour my head hath worn the circlet of the empire, and I trust the Saxon duke will bear witness that the heart that beat beneath them hath not disgraced the lions of thy vesture."

"He hath, indeed, borne himself right worthily in the fray, your Majesty,"

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answered the Saxon, smoothly; "but that is to be expected in any of your Majesty's friends, even though they may have of late fallen into disfavor."

"This wearing of the crown, count, is a serious affair. 'T is a weighty bauble, and none but men of proof may essay it even for an hour. Is 't not so, Lion of Saxony?"

"True!" exclaimed Henry of Saxony, in some confusion. "It is indeed a heavy burden."

"So heavy, in fact, that some of our friends would fain relieve us of the pressure, hey, my lord of Saxony?"

"So it would seem, sire," answered the duke, unsteadily, recovering his self-possession by a great effort, "since this landless, proscribed young man hath sought to do so."

"Aye, 't is true; and he was not alone in his attempt, I fancy."

"No, my liege. He had with him a score of as stout men-at-arms as ever set

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lance in rest or struck on shield; as many of my brave and loyal men have bit the dust this night and lie cold in the forest yonder — in thy behalf.”

“Oh! in our behalf, indeed! We ’ll see thee well recompensed, upon our royal word! And what of the other knight who would fain have taken the emperor?”

“What mean you, my liege?” came the answer in sudden consternation at the keenness of the question.

“Nothing, if the Duke of Saxony do not understand. But, I pray you, tell us of the adventure. We burn to know the story of your fight for us, that we may well reward your enterprise and prowess aright.”

“There came one, my liege, to my camp this night, with news that this desperate adventurer had conspired to seize thy person — nay, that he had even done so; that he and his would seek asylum in the Schwarzwald which stretches beyond the castle wall. I knew a path which

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intercepted the road that he must take. Summoning these gentle knights and valiant men-at-arms, I saddled with all speed and galloped forward, thinking to rescue your Majesty at the **Witch's Dale**. It happened as we had planned, save that your Majesty was not there, and by some yet unexplained chance the count had become aware of our purpose. Not less prepared than we, he boldly dashed into the pass. Our men, surprised, fell back; there was a fierce melley; but when the count was beaten down and one half of his men had fallen, we took the rest, and, glad at thy escape, have brought the traitor hither."

At this juncture a woman in disordered dress, hastily put on, ran into the room, calling loudly upon her mistress. It was the ancient dame **Gertrude**. She stopped in great surprise at the sight of the crowd of armed men. Her gaze fell successively upon the bound count, the fierce and sullen Saxon, and lastly upon the

THE LOYALTY OF THE SAXON

countess. With a glad cry of recognition, she forced her way toward her, exclaiming:

“Lady Matilda, thou art safe! Thank God and our Blessed Lady. I heard the noise in the courtyard and saw these men. I screamed to thee, but thou —”

“Seest thou not thy king, Gertrude?” interrupted her mistress.

“My liege,” said the old gentlewoman, sinking to her knees, “I cry your pardon for my blindness.”

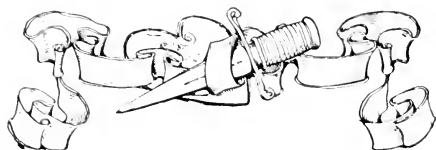
“’T is freely given,” said the king, smiling debonairly. “We ourselves see little else when the Lady Matilda is present.”

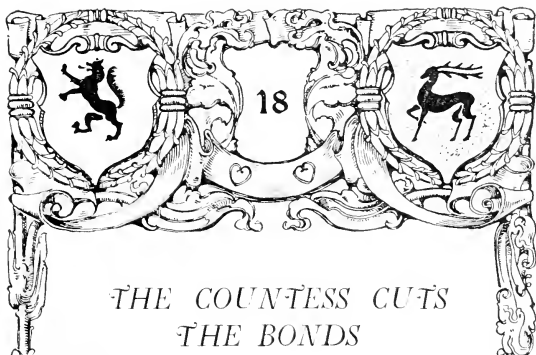
“Sire,” questioned the old woman, wonderingly, “give me leave. What has happened? What mean these men?”

“Madam, while you have slept, men have played for hearts and crowns, kings have been taken, women abducted, empires lost and won, rebellion hath lifted

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its head, loyalty hath thwarted it — the world hath swept on while thou hast slept the quiet sleep of tired old age. We do regret thou hast been disturbed before the morning. Yet thy mistress will be glad of thee. Go to her and see the last scene of the play.”





THE COUNTESS CUTS
THE BONDS



OW, my lord of Saxony," said the king, turning again to the duke, "thou hast told a loyal tale and wrought a noble deed; be sure we shall requite it worthily. But did you not mark that the man whom you struck down wore the imperial crown, and upon his breast ramped the lions of Hohenstaufen?"

"Nay, my liege, not until later; in the darkness and confusion attendant upon the melley, men struck at random."

"'T were fortunate, prince, that I was not there, then."

HOHENZOLLERN

“Yes, your Majesty,” returned the Saxon, confused again.

“Well, this is neither here nor there,” returned the emperor, smiling. “The question is, What shall we do with this man?”

“I submit, your Majesty, that his fate is already decided.”

“How so?”

“His life is doubly forfeit, lord, being banned and being traitor, having raised his hand against the emperor.”

“And the penalty for this last, think you, should be?”

“Death, my liege.”

“How say you, gentles all?” asked the emperor, turning to the knights.

“Are ye all agreed to that?”

“Aye, my lord. Down with all traitors! ’T is death to strike against the emperor!” came in a great chorus from the men.

“’T is strange! Ye are all agreed, then? Yet would we condemn no man

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unheard, however great his crime. How say you, Conrad of Hohenzollern? Canst urge a plea? Wilt sue for mercy?"

"My lord," answered the count, simply, "to sue for mercy implies a fault, a crime. I have done naught but love a maiden, as any man might. And if I wooed somewhat too roughly for thee, yet I stoop not to bend the knee for that to any man — unless it be her father. I, guiltless, ask no mercy from any hand, though it sway the scepter of the world!"

"What wilt thou ask, then? For what dost thou plead?"

"My liege, for justice."

"Justice! A man under a ban? A man who has traitorously prisoned his emperor? Justice —"

"Even so."

"What mean you?"

"An thou dost not know, lord, I cannot tell thee."

"By the mass! count, justice thou shalt have, and so shall every one who

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asks it of Barbarossa; but before we pronounce sentence against thee for thy offense against our person, we fain would ask, is there any one here to act as thy advocate?"

"I am a man of few words, your Majesty," said old Degerberg, stepping forward. "If your Majesty would let your vengeance fall on me, so that my master go free, perchance justice might be satisfied, and your Majesty as well."

"I will think on thy noble offer," said Barbarossa, gravely. "Hath no one else here aught to urge?"

"My lord," said the Countess Matilda, "you cannot do this thing! The count is guilty of naught but loving me. Be- think you, sir; 't was I who grasped your arm in the hall, else had you ne'er been captured. Love blinds, they say, and when men love, sometimes they know not what they do. Aye, sire, he even blinds the emperor. Grant me that mercy for which the knight could not sue. Re-

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call thy ring, sire. Thy feet have trodden in his life-blood upon the stricken field where he lay weltering before thee from the blow that, had he not been there, might have struck thee down. Wilt walk again in the blood of a faithful servant — nay, in mine? He hath risked his life many and many a time in thy service, and that this very night, as yonder double-dyed traitor, disgracing the Saxon roses on his breast, knoweth well!”

“By the splendor of God! lady,” cried the Saxon, furiously, “thou art but a woman, yet were there a man of your blood to take up your quarrel, I’d make him retract your aspersing words at this my sword’s point!”

“Had I a weapon in my hand, nay, were these arms but unbound, with naked fists I’d force thy words back in thy throat, thou false Saxon!” cried Conrad, struggling fiercely in his bonds.

“Countess Matilda, Henry of Saxony, peace between thee!” said the emperor,

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sternly. "I have heard all that hath been said. The ban must be carried out. Madam, you may execute our royal will. You wear a dagger at your waist. Approach the count and strike him where you will."

It was a cruel thing to say, yet the emperor smiled graciously at her as he uttered these strange words—a smile that she alone saw, that she alone understood.

With a woman's quick instinct, she sprang toward the count, her eyes bright with anticipation.

Murmurs arose from the knights and men-at-arms in the hall. Even the Saxon duke stepped forward.

"Your Majesty," he said, "it were not meet to make a woman thy executioner when men are here."

"The privilege is mine, and I embrace it," cried Matilda, as she reached the side of Hohenzollern.

He faced her uplifted dagger, smiling.

"Strike hard and swift, sweet," he



“ ‘Strike hard and swift, sweet,’ he said. ‘Death
were welcome from thy hand.’ ”

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said. "Death were welcome from thy hand."

"My liege," said the countess, encircling Count Conrad in her arms, "you bade me strike where I will. I thank thee, and I cut the bonds. Take thou the dagger, Conrad. Now, one blow for me, and then for thee, and we may love in peace forever; this is the mercy of the king."

"Nay, then," cried Henry of Saxony, promptly, "I myself will do the emperor's will, since the woman fails. Stand aside, madam. Have at thee, count!"

He raised his sword and sprang forward. Matilda threw herself across the breast of Hohenzollern to meet the stroke, but like a black thunderbolt a mighty form sprang between, and the blade of the duke was shattered against the upflung battle-ax of old Degerberg.

"No one strikes the Hohenzollern," he roared in mighty voice, "while I am alive!"

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He turned and faced the duke, shield out, ax threatening.

“A sword — for God’s love, give me a weapon!” cried the count, striving to unclasp Matilda’s arms.

“Ah!” cried the emperor. “Well played indeed, Degerberg. Give back, Saxon! I reprieve the count. I revoke the ban. I suspend judgment. He shall, indeed, have justice!”

“And what of me, my lord, who have periled my life and lost my men to rescue thee? What shall I have?”

“Justice, too. Swabian, stand forth. Knowest thou this man, Henry Welf? Dietrick, what heardst thou at the Saxon’s tent this night?”

“I heard the Saxon Lion yonder plan to seize thy person, master, to kill thee, if need be, in the fray, and lay the blame upon the Count of Hohenzollern there.”

“Thou caitiff dog!” shouted Duke Henry, in furious wrath.

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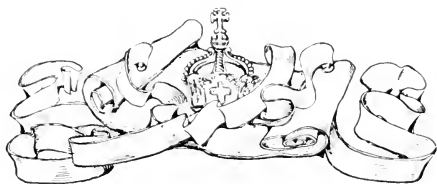
“Silence!” roared Barbarossa. “And what then?”

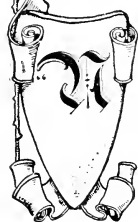
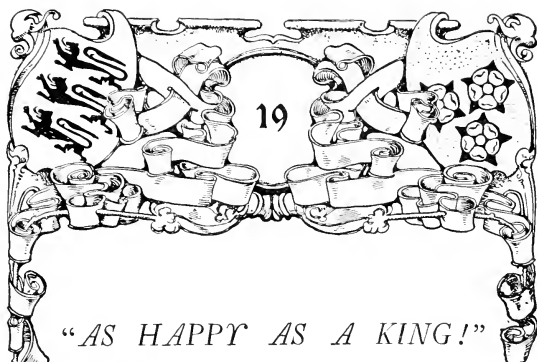
“I rode away and warned the count, and the rest your Majesty knows.”

“What sayest thou to this, Henry of Saxony? Have a care, sir,” continued Barbarossa. “Sully not thy knightly lips with falsehood. Add not lies to treason, for I believe this man. You struck at the royal crown when worn by the count yonder, and if I had been beneath it, I wot well I would have felt the blow. More than this, I have learned that the power of Saxony in battle array is encamped less than a league from this place. Thou hast not acknowledged, save by the temporary service of bended knee here in this hall, our election as the emperor of this great realm. I know thou hast been disaffected, recalcitrant, rebellious. Perhaps thou too wouldst wear the crown? I see it all. This knight here did indeed raise his hand against his sovereign; but when the hour

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of peril came he forgot his just grievance against his monarch — aye, I said just. He remembered only his duty toward his king, his affection for his sometime friend, and he did but wear the crown to save me from thy sword. What hast thou to say? What canst thou answer? What doth he deserve that raiseth hand against the king? What saidest thou, and ye all? Is 't not death? Was it not so, gentles all? I have your words for it, given but a moment since in this very hall. Shalt suffer death, then! Down on thy knees again, Lion of Saxony, and beg, not for justice, but for mercy!"





“*AS HAPPY AS A KING!*”

“NOT so, my liege,” answered the duke, composedly, having thought quickly while Frederick was speaking. “The enterprise is yet mine. I am still the master player, and these”—pointing to his startled men—“are my counters which shall win the game. I deny nothing. I have not acceded to thy election to the empire, and I will not. The bearded roses of Saxony bear nothing but thorns for the Lion of Hohenstaufen. I lie not, on my knightly faith! I did intend to capture thee and lay the blame

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upon this poor puppet, the sport of kings, when he had been killed. But that Swabian traitor yonder, with whom I shall presently deal, hath balked the scheme. Natheless, 't is not too late. Thou art here alone. I make thee a prisoner, sir. An you surrender peaceably, I may yet spare your life, and if the Lady Matilda seek a spouse, why, the wolf of Vohburg may find it not unmeet to wed the roses of my Saxon land — especially when they overshadow the world."

"Thou too hast ambitions, then," said the kaiser, calmly smiling, "and art in love! I am alone —"

"The king is not alone when I am here!" burst out Hohenzollern, springing to the side of the king and snatching sword and shield from the wall.

"And I go with my master!" cried old Degerberg, suiting action to word.

"And I still can strike a blow!" exclaimed the Swabian soldier, whipping out his blade.

“AS HAPPY AS A KING!”

Meanwhile the emperor, who seemed in no way alarmed, had beckoned to the Lady Matilda. He had whispered a word or two in her ear, and, in obedience to a seeming order, she had run unimpeded back of him to the window at the other end of the hall. She stood listening a moment in the night, and presently returned smiling and nodding to the emperor, in time to hear Henry the Lion say, as he witnessed the defiant bearing of the three soldiers surrounding Barbarossa :

“Your Majesty is a bold swordsman, and we have tested the mettle of at least one of your defenders this night. If your Majesty persists in defiance, many good men will bite the dust ; but the end is not less certain. We are an hundred to four. Your Majesty is a statesman as well as a warrior. Yield, I pray, and I promise fair treatment to all.”

“And the crown of empire ?”

“Perchance it may lodge upon a

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worthier head when thou hast lost it, fair lord."

"And that I shall never do!" exclaimed the king, boldly.

"At your peril, then!" cried the Saxon. "Gentlemen, forward!"

"Stop!" cried the emperor. "Do ye not hear the trampling of horse? Troops approaching! Hark! The thunder of hoofs upon the drawbridge! Now they cross the courtyard. Listen! They mount the stairs — they are in the ante-chamber! Dost hear?"

Voices outside, growing nearer, roared out the king's name.

"The king!"

"A Hohenstaufen!"

"The Emperor Frederick!"

"The king! The king!"

"To me! To Barbarossa!" suddenly cried Frederick, lifting his powerful voice and sending it vibrating through the castle.

There was a ringing of steel, a crash-

“AS HAPPY AS A KING!”

ing of armor, a sound of many feet, without the hall. The emperor raised his voice still higher, shouting:

“Treachery! Treachery! We are attacked! This way, my men!”

As he spoke a perfect avalanche of men, armed to the teeth, poured into the hall from every door. The Saxons found themselves outnumbered five to one. They were overpowered before they had time to strike a blow, and, with Henry the Lion, they were made prisoners on the instant.

At the head of the emperor's forces came Baron Eckhardt in full armor, helmet down.

“We are in time, your Majesty, thank God! I would I had a draught of wine, sire!” he cried from between the bars, as he knelt at the emperor's feet.

“In the very nick of time, faithful friend,” replied the king, smiling at him; “and the wine later. What force brought you with you?”

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“Five hundred knights and men-at-arms, sire.”

“And the main body of the army?”

“They are on the march now at full speed.”

“Raise the drawbridge, then. By your leave, Lady Matilda, we take your castle but to hold it for this night. Close the gates and man the walls. Put everything in posture for defense. My lord of Saxony, I doubt not, will have his men here betimes. ’T is a prudent, far-seeing prince, and we must make ready for them. Well, sir, you have played your game right valiantly and well, and, as you see, have lost.”

“Your Majesty is right,” replied the Saxon, gloomily. “I have hazarded all upon the throw, and the main is over. I repine not. I tender your Majesty my sword.”

“Wouldst not rather wear it in my service, duke, than surrender it to my hand?” asked the emperor, kindly.

“AS HAPPY AS A KING!”

“Can that be so, sire?”

“Know, O Saxon,” he replied, “that you alone of the electors of the empire have not acknowledged me as emperor. There are other nobles who refuse, but for them I care not much. But you — I would give much to win your puissant sword and cunning brain to my cause — the cause of Germany; and I would fain not begin with bloodshed a reign from which I hope so much. Even though you merit not my clemency, duke, upon my faith, I will extend it, and with it give thee back Bavaria.”

“I do not sue for it, sire,” said the proud Saxon, hesitatingly.

“Nay, then, I give it freely. Thou hast been my enemy; be my friend, and Frederick Barbarossa and Henry the Lion together shall rule the empire — nay, the world! With thee to help me, and these gallant knights and gentlemen to follow on, we will have here an empire so just that the meanest peasant that

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speeds the plow may not be defrauded of his simplest right. What say you? Wilt be my friend? I will forget all that has passed this night. Speak! the emperor stoops not to offer twice."

"My liege, thou hast a noble and a generous heart," said the Saxon duke, impulsively kneeling at his feet and catching his hand, overcome by magnanimity. "Thou hast won me. I am doubly conquered. I swear to thee, upon my knightly honor, I will be to thee a loyal servitor and friend. My men, cry with me, 'Life and health to our emperor!'"

"Now thou art a man indeed, fair cousin of Saxony and Bavaria," cried Barbarossa, well pleased at this bloodless victory, as the Saxons obeyed the duke's behest. "Rise, sir. Unbind them all, Baron Eckhardt; they are our friends. Open the gates; lower the drawbridge. The emperor needs no bars to protect him from his loyal subjects of Saxony.

“AS HAPPY AS A KING!”

Post men upon the roads, Eckhardt, lest the two armies should unwittingly come to blows. We ourselves, with our brother of Saxony, will presently visit his camp. You see, I trust thee, sir.”

“And thou wilt find me worthy, sire,” answered the grateful Saxon.

“And hath the king no further word for me?” asked the Countess Matilda.

“Ha, countess! What would you of me?”

“I would have your Majesty remember,” she replied.

“What mean you?”

“Recall thy ring, sire. Thou hast it back; wilt not redeem thy knightly pledge?”

“Thou wouldst have a boon of me?”

“Aye, sire.”

“What is that?”

“The life of the Count of Hohen-zollern.”

“Take it freely, lady, and do you keep this ring,” he replied promptly, returning

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it to her with a low bow. "Perchance thou shalt ask of me another favor for, it may be, thy son, in future days. Ho! ho! Comes the red to thy cheek at the thought of that! Count of Hohenzollern, you tore up the ban; the riven parchment lies still within the hall. Bring it hither. See, I put it in the fire. Thou art restored to all thy dignities, and hast place once more in our affection. Thou hast bravely borne the Hohenstaufen lions. Quarter them with thine own arms in memory of thy service. 'T is our royal will. But, count, a word: steal no more emperors; and — it might be well for thee and thy noble wife to avoid our person for a space. By the mass! man, we can control our will, but by no means enforce our heart. An thou wouldst preserve thy wife, sir, take advice; take her away. Far to the north lies the fair city of Nuremberg. Go thou there, and as our burgrave hold it loyally for us."

“AS HAPPY AS A KING!”

“Your Majesty speaks like a man, like a friend, like a brother, and not less like an emperor, and I swear to deserve thy kindness. My house is thine, sire, and thou hast no more loyal subject than the Hohenzollern!” cried the count, kneeling in homage to his liege.

“I believe thee, friend. Is there any one else who would ask aught of the emperor?”

His glance roamed about the apartment, and fell upon the form of Dietrick.

“You, Swabian? Wilt stay with me in my body-guard?”

“Nay, lord; ’t were too near, just now, to the Lion of Saxony, and perchance I might feel his paw. Nay, sire; by your leave, not with thee. But will the noble Count of Hohenzollern take me?” said the Swabian, turning to the count.

“My word, I will, soldier,” answered Hohenzollern, promptly; “an thou serve me faithfully, thou wilt serve the emperor well.”

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“Right,” said the emperor. “Take this purse; go with him. Look to his advancement, count. And thou, faithful Degerberg, what for thee?”

“Nothing, sire.”

“Tush, man! Thou didst lay hands upon us. Know that no base-born hand may touch the emperor’s person. Kneel thou before me! Thy sword, count,” he cried.

As old Degerberg, wondering, knelt before the smiling emperor, Barbarossa struck him three light blows over the shoulder.

“Rise,” he cried after the royal accolade, “Sir Wilhelm, Baron von Degerberg! The same rescript that makes your master burgrave of Nuremberg makes you his lieutenant-governor. I will provide estate to carry that ‘von’ and the barony, and may you live long to serve both me and him.”

“By St. Bennet!” cried the delighted old Degerberg, swelling with naïve pride.

“AS HAPPY AS A KING!”

“I never looked to be a noble, but that was well done, your Majesty. Long live our Kaiser Fritz Redbeard!” he shouted, and a great acclamation rolled through the hall.

“That’s well,” said the king. “Now, genties all, I would be alone awhile. Put out the torches. Leave me. Baron Eckhardt knows where the wine is kept. I bid you away from the room. See! the day breaks; night is over.”

One by one, beginning with the least and ending with the highest, the great company withdrew from the hall. Count Hohenzollern and Matilda were at last left alone with the emperor.

“Your Majesty,” said the count, “hath dealt very nobly with us, and your Majesty shall find that we are not ungrateful.”

“You shall be married before noon-day,” said the king, “and start upon your way at once. I forget all that has passed, and I forgive as I would fain be forgiven. Lady Matilda, your hand.”

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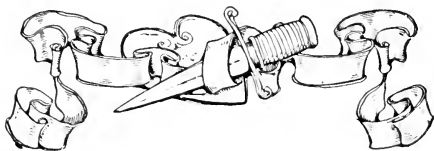
“Nay, my lord; for this time, on the lips — thou hast won the right.”

The king's face flushed as he bent his head in response to the gracious permission and fervently kissed the countess.

“Farewell,” he said, “brave heart and beauteous lady! You little know what I have given up — what this night hath cost me.”

As the hanging dropped behind the retreating lovers, the emperor sank down in a chair by the table and leaned his head upon his hand.

“Alone,” he murmured sadly, at last — “alone, and as happy as a king!”



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